The Penguin Modern Painters

A. 69

STANLEY SPENCER

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ERIC NEWTON

STANLEY SPENCER

PENGUIN BOOKS

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STANLEY SPENCER

STANLEY SPENCER was born in the village of Cookham-on-Thames in Berkshire in 1892 and has lived there most of his life. He studied at the Slade School from 1910 to 1914. Those two brief statements contain almost all the information necessary for an understanding of his work as an artist. In Spencer's case the usual biographical outline is hardly relevant. What happened "to" Spencer counts for little as compared with what happened "in" him. Even a précis of his career – a précis in which words like "Paris", "influence", "development" are keywords, in which formative friendships are stressed, in which events and their dates are important – would not help to explain his paintings. Properly read, his pictures are, in themselves, an adequate autobiography.

The reader will possibly enquire what keywords *do* apply to Stanley Spencer, and in what manner his pictures may be "properly read". The answer to the first question is easy. The keywords are two – "Cookham" and "The Bible". The second is a very difficult question indeed. This brief essay is an attempt to answer it.

The fact that one finds oneself using a warning phrase like "properly read" shows that Spencer is not to be approached in quite the normal way – the way in which one would approach, for example, Bonnard or Sickert or Toulouse-Lautrec. From them he is different not in degree but in kind. They express a sort of generalized delight in the spectacle of life and can make a picture out of any little random slice of it that catches the eye. With them what matters is their power to take life unawares and then turn it, deliciously, into paint : with them one rarely asks what this or that particular picture "means". One merely likes (or dislikes) their attitude to the visible world and the sensitive, painterly gifts whereby that attitude is made manifest on canvas. With Spencer it is not an attitude to the visible world that counts, nor is there any question of taking life unawares. With him each picture is a statement of a particular message, an illustration of a specific idea in pictorial form. Miss the particular message – or, worse, misunderstand it – and you have lost at least half your means of enjoying his art. Spencer is a painter to whom subject-matter – which fashionable criticism has been at so much pains to discredit as being a quite unimportant though unfortunately necessary peg to hand a painting on – is vital.

"A literary artist, then?" the reader interposes, remembering the fashionable critic's favourite term of abuse. Yes: if "literary" means obsessed by human rather than by æsthetic values. No: if it means that prose or verse could have said as much or spoken as vividly as paint.

The "proper" way with Spencer is to regard him as an illustrator – a story teller, if you like, but a story teller of a special kind. The illustrator is not quite the same as the narrative painter. He belongs to a subdivision of the greater class of narrative painters. The narrative painter (the Giotto of the Arena Chapel, the Leonardo of *The Last Supper*, the Tintoretto of the Scuola of San Rocco) tells his story as vividly as he can, trusting to his title and the common knowledge of his contemporaries to supply the context and fill in the gaps. He gives you a few easily recognizable types, supplies them with a few broad, self-explanatory gestures and constructs a *tableau vivant* that any normally observant man can understand. Not so the illustrator. *His* picture's full meaning is only apparent when it is fitted to a text. It is a comment on, an amplification of a text: it can only make itself clear when the text is available. The significance of a picture entitled *Satan Smiting Job with Boils* or *Sarah Tubb and the Heavenly Visitors*, can only be half apprehended if the spectator has no previous knowledge of Job or of Sarah Tubb and of the adventures and misadventures that befell them. Each picture by an illustrator must be accompanied by a case-history, a text. When that text exists and is common knowledge, as with Blake's illustrations to the Book of Job, the problem of interpretation is fairly simple. When it exists but is not common knowledge, as with Blake's illustrations to his own prophetic books, the problem is more difficult. When it exists only in the mind of the artist, as with about one-third of Spencer's pictures, the problem becomes acute.

Not all of Spencer's pictures deal with private mythologies of this sort; to which the spectator has no key. Therefore not all of Spencer's pictures are puzzling in this way. A glance at the illustrations shows that they fall into two classes. There are the purely documentary statements of fact in which the physical eye alone has been consulted — the landscapes, most of the portraits, the studies of flowers and still-lifes — pictures that are sometimes quite aggressively unimaginative, as though the artist had desperately tried to turn himself into a camera. And there are the imaginative works, the "illustrations", in which the artist's mind's eye is almost all that matters and his physical eye has merely been called in, as it were, to fill in gaps in the mental vision.

The two kinds of approach merge into each other in different degrees. In *The Last Supper* the physical eye has supplied hardly anything but the brick walls. In *Swan Upping* it has taken on itself more than half the responsibility for the picture. In the recent Shipbuilding panels *Riveters* and *Welders* it has contributed considerably more than half. In each picture one could work out an almost mathematical proportion of mind's eye to physical eye. There is nothing unusual in that. It is, in fact, the blending of the two that decides the flavour of every artist's work. What *is* unusual is precisely Spencer's failure (with a handful of remarkable exceptions) to blend the two. What gives his pictures their oddness (and some of them are among the oddest pictures ever painted) is that the two elements co-exist without blending. In his best work the mixture does not matter because the intense imaginative and emotional heat of the conception has communicated itself to the photographic details and welded them artificially into the picture. The ivy-covered cottage, the ladders, the railings in *Christ Carrying the Cross*, which would be intolerably banal if divorced from their dramatic context, have been caught up into a miracle and they begin to become themselves miraculous. Whenever this contagious power of the imagination fails to operate one becomes conscious of an incoherence in the picture. The imaginative heat has failed to penetrate the whole: passages of prose obtrude themselves and refuse to be caught up in the rhythm of the verse.

In Spencer's early work this hardly ever happens. *The Visitation* (painted in 1913) is a notable example of the process of contagion. The two village women are transmuted into Mary and Anne by an imaginative alchemy that takes Cookham merely as its raw material. But the corrugated iron roofs seen through the doorway are just plain scraps of undigested Cookham. They do not contribute to the mood, and yet they are snatched up into it and transformed by it.

That Spencer can do this is a measure both of his strength and his weakness. To a Giorgione, a Botticelli, a Greco such a process would be unthinkable. With them the miracle is complete at its very conception. Their pictures come straight from the crucible, marred by no interior flaws. But, given the incomplete, the flawed miracle, how many artists have managed to survive its disadvantages? Breughel (Spencer's nearest counterpart. He too was an illustrator: he too was a villager; to him, too, the subject-matter was vital) could do it. But one has only to think of Ghirlandajo to remember how the mind's eye can be starved to death by the arid domination of the physical eye.

Spencer's purely photographic painting, then, can be left out of account in this essay. It needs no explanation. It must, of course, be mentioned, for he has produced a great deal of it. I have included just as much of it among the accompanying illustrations as is necessary to show its quality. To those who admire keenness of eye coupled with skill of hand it is admirable. To me it has a dry, unlovable harshness which begins to set my teeth on edge once the admiration has worn off. And yet, without that skill and keenness of eye not one of his imaginative illustrations could have been painted—not even *The Last Supper* which has so little of the seen world clinging about it.

And now to return to Spencer's keywords—"Cookham" and "The Bible"—in order to discover into what channels they have led him.

Every artist has his keywords. (Breughel's were "Peasants" and "Action", the young Titian's were "Women" and "Summer afternoon", Michelangelo's was "Virility", Monet's was "Light" and so on). If the artist follows their guidance, he cannot help being sincere and he may be triumphant: if he resists their guidance he is almost sure to crash. Spencer has usually followed but sometimes resisted.

Whenever he has followed one comes upon a revelation and a mystery. And when one comes to analyse the given work it usually turns out that the Bible is responsible for the revelation and Cookham for the mystery. That is inevitable since, if Spencer is to be regarded as an illustrator, an interpreter of a text, the Bible is a known and published text, Cookham an unknown and unpublished one. The Bible is a public mythology, Cookham a private one. What gives Spencer his special flavour is that he interprets the Bible in terms of Cookham, in much the same way as *Green Pastures* interprets God in terms of the negro of the Southern States.

By the word "Cookham" I do not, of course, mean a Berkshire village, but a young painter's early environment that had bitten deep into his emotional and visual life and filled him with a host of emotional and visual memories even before he had begun to paint: a churchyard, an iron bed with four white knobs in an attic, a girl in a spotted frock with her hair dressed in the shape of a cottage loaf, a sponge in a bathroom, a mid-Victorian hat rack, a woman called Sarah Tubb, a funny old man with a beard and a tattered coat. This Cookham asserts itself in his pictures in little patches, as though *this* bit or *that* bit of Cookham had been of peculiar significance to him. No painter has ever stressed the importance of isolated things as Spencer has. A sponge, a chair, a watch-chain, a spotted dress suddenly leap out at one from his pictures, proclaiming their separate importances. And whenever that happens, one recognizes an authentic fragment of autobiography.

Sometimes there is no mystery at all. The Tate Gallery *Resurrection* (Resurrection is a recurring theme, almost an obsession with him) takes place quite naturally in Cookham churchyard. Christ carried the cross through the village street – where else should He carry it? The Centurion's servant lies tossing on the bed with the white knobs. The bed is pure autobiography. It probably still exists, somewhere in Cookham. One can imagine little Stanley gazing at it affectionately and one can understand how, years later, when the picture came to be painted, that bed and no other was picked out from a jumble of childish memories because it was the kind of bed that is to be found in the servant's bedroom. Why should a Centurion's servant have a different kind of bed from any other servant?

The sick boy on the bed, on the other hand, is pure imagination. The children praying are something between the two. There is never any doubt as to the point at which visual memory stops and visual imagination begins. The remembered objects have a material density, an aggressive reality that is startling. The imagined forms are just as definite but the material density is lacking. But what is noteworthy is the lack of hesitation in the portrayal of both. The feet and the festooned draperies in *The Last Supper* are painted with as much assurance as the brick walls. They belong to different worlds, but worlds equally real to the artist. Each has its own inevitability.

When Spencer abandons the Bible and leaves the spectator with no guide beyond a brief title he can be really puzzling. Pictures like *Parents Resurrecting*, or *Adoration of Young Girls*, or *Sarah Tubb and the Heavenly Visitors* are evidently packed with meaning. It may even be a quite simple meaning, but one can never be sure. The clue is always lacking. Had Bonnard or Sickert painted pictures with the same titles one would not dream of demanding a psychological or mystical explanation. In their case, the picture, based on a chance incident, would have come first: the title would have been an intriguing addition. With Spencer, one can be sure, the title came first, since the picture illustrates no seen incident but an inner experience which the spectator can only grasp intuitively. The spectator is in the position of a man who is given a set of illustrations to an autobiography that has not yet been written. Perhaps, one day, Spencer will write it. Meanwhile it is no part of my task to make wild guesses.

What the spectator *can* grasp is the truthfulness of Spencer's observation. His pictures are full of little queernesses that look at first sight like deliberate perversity on the painter's part but turn out to be penetrating records of the genuine queerness of everyday life. Such, for example, is the dogged persistence of the baby in *Workmen in the House*, who tries to fit a clothes peg on to its sister's gaiter (do they still wear gaiters in Cookham ?) : or the other baby in *Cows at Cookham* passionately grasping at a dandelion : or the women in *Parents Resurrecting* who fondle the clothes and thrust their hands into the pockets of the old men in order to make quite certain of their material presence : or the utter exhaustion of Mary in *The Coming of the*

Wise Men, her hair spread, starfish-wise, on the pillow.

At times this penetration is profound enough to become true inspiration. Throughout the *Christ in the Wilderness* series there is a sense of Christ's oneness with nature expressed in the very shapes themselves. In the *Scorpion* panel the sprawling gesture and undulating lines of the drapery become one with the sprawling, undulating lines of the hills behind. (It is worth noting that Spencer's insistent rhythms are almost always by-products of his subject-matter, and not essays in rhythm for rhythm's sake). And in the midst of this clumsy, primæval arabesque of line the two focal points, the neat, impish little scorpion and the massive, unkempt head contemplate each other with complete understanding. Here and in the *Foxes* panel Spencer comes somewhere near that combination of simplicity and profundity that was Giotto's special gift. Here there is no puzzle. Here, for once, the Bible is exerting its full force. It is interpreted cosmically, and not merely seen in a Cookham setting.

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"But", the reader will presumably interrupt at this point, "all this may be interesting and even true as an explanation of the genesis of Spencer's pictures, but surely it has very little bearing on their quality as works of art? To be told that Spencer's subject-matter is drawn from such and such a set of experiences, visual or emotional, is merely to be told of a set of starting points. Surely we are concerned not with starting points but with achievements? Here are a set of pictures full of strange distortions, deliberate bits of uncouthness mixed with other bits of deliberate realism—pictures, in a word, whose insistent mannerisms are certainly not accounted for by calling the artist an illustrator of an unwritten book. Surely it is Spencer's manner, not his matter that calls for comment?"

Yes. I am aware that the orthodox critic will accuse me of having put the cart before the horse. I have done so intentionally because, in Spencer's case, the cart is more important than the horse. I have dwelt upon his habit of mind rather than his habit of eye because his habit of mind provides the principal clue to his style. None the less his style is worth analysing, though it can only be analysed in the light of what has already been said, for his style is an inevitable corollary of his habit of mind.

He is interested, for example, in oddities of human behaviour in so far as they are an index of human feeling. Therefore he stresses oddness of gesture. Therefore, too, he tends to enlarge or stress any portion of the figure in which gesture counts – the hands of the workman holding the saw in *Workmen in the House*, the hands of Jesus in the *Scorpion* picture.

He is interested in *things* for their own sake, not for what they look like under certain conditions. He is not at all interested in the envelope of light and air that surrounds them, that envelope so dear to the Impressionists. Therefore, he tends to accumulate objects in his pictures, to relate them to each other dramatically rather than visually, and, above all, to paint them in sharp, harsh definition, as though he were more concerned with their nature than with their appearance.

Colour only interests him as an attribute of the object. Grass is green, bricks are red, a bluebell is blue. Therefore he tends to use colour descriptively rather than emotionally. Occasionally, especially in his use of white, his colour has a more than descriptive value. The white robes of the benign visitors in *The Coming of the Wise Men* intensify the reverent mood of the picture, but usually his colour is either meaningless or else merely decorative or heraldic as in the bold patterning of *Cows at Cookham*. I doubt, even, whether Spencer visualises his pictures in colour from the outset. Their colour may be pleasant, but it is rarely an integral part of the picture's meaning. Occasionally it may have been prompted by the colour-pattern of a thing seen, as in *The Wool Shop*, but even so it is a record of colourful things, not a creation in terms of colour.

To those who regard painting as a kind of confectionery and love it for its sensuous qualities, Spencer is bound to be an unsympathetic painter. His paint is hard and unluscious. There is something dogged and joyless in the superb confidence with which he applies it, as though he were transferring, by some mechanical process, an image from his mind's retina to his canvas. Renoir (to take the opposite extreme) caresses his picture into life: Spencer builds his up like a bricklayer.

Finally his disturbing habit of generalizing the shapes of figures while he particularizes the shapes of things (for example, the generalized shape of the workman as against the particularized shapes of the saw and brushes in *Workmen in the House*) needs explaining. Again it is the logical result of his refusal to use his physical eye as a crutch to support his mind's eye. If his creative imagination fails to supply the workman with a convincing anatomical structure, so much the worse. Rather than call in a model and make good the deficiency, Spencer will be content to leave a leg or an arm sack-like and amorphous. If his imagination fails him he has the courage to admit it. Disturbing these amorphous forms may be, but they are disturbing because of their sincerity. A lesser artist would have gone to nature for help, and nature would have betrayed him. His picture's imaginative temperature would have dropped. Spencer knows that anatomical accuracy can never be a satisfactory substitute for imaginative integrity.

. . .

Curiously enough Spencer's most complete and most satisfying work has nothing to do with Cookham. I have said that biographical facts are irrelevant in Spencer's case; that the formative influences in his life were not "events" but inner experiences. That is true with one important exception. The one big "event" in his life was his service as a Red Cross Orderly and, later, as a soldier in Macedonia in the war of 1914-18. During those years experiences of a new kind assailed him. Not the everyday experiences of village life so vividly reflected in most of his paintings, but a sudden set of temporary impacts in which close companionship with men of his own age, suffering, movement, violent activity were forced upon him, snatching him away from a world in which he could be a spectator into a world of action. It is this world of action, with Spencer himself in the heart of it rather than on the fringe of it, that is depicted in the Memorial Chapel of Burghclere near Newbury.

How the chapel came into existence is worth recording. It hardly needs saying that Spencer's war experiences impressed themselves deeply on him. That he should have wished to externalize those experiences was inevitable. What is more worth noting is that after an interval of four years he should have had so definite a plan in mind. In 1923 he made a set of drawings showing the interior of a small chapel whose side walls were divided up into panels while the East wall consisted vaguely of a painted framework to an arch. Each of the panels on the side walls (there are sixteen of them in all, surmounted by an irregular frieze) is worked out on a small scale but in quite unhesitating detail, as though the whole interior of the imagined building had taken final shape in the artist's mind. Two admirers of Spencer's work, Mr. and Mrs. Behrend, saw the drawings and realized that here was a man with an urgent message to communicate and a vision both definite and intense. They decided to build in brick the chapel that Spencer had built in his imagination. The chapel with all its mural paintings was completed in 1933, and apart from the East wall on which Spencer has painted a huge *Resurrection*, the finished scheme departs hardly at all from the drawings made eleven years earlier.

To enter the chapel is to realize that one is in the presence of a major creative work. It is the outcome not of an intense and isolated effort of imagination but of a steady and controlled outpouring from a full heart. One feels that, having arrived at this pitch of creative energy, Spencer could have gone on and covered the walls of a dozen chapels with paintings equally pregnant. For this is the work of an artist manifestly in harmony with himself and with the world he depicts. Once or twice before he had risen well above the level of autobiography, but here he does it consistently, effortlessly and on an epic scale. Here, one sees clearly, he is not just an artist fascinated by life recording his fascination, but a man living and struggling together with a crowd of nameless young companions, and that the struggle, in all its warm-hearted complexity, has been translated easily into the inevitable language for Spencer, the language of paint. Soldiers working, digging, map reading, erecting tents, building dams, folding blankets, washing lockers – doing everything, in fact, except fight a visible battle with a visible enemy – crowd the walls. And yet the walls are not crowded. There is a discipline of design throughout that fits everything into its place. And as a climax to this earth-bound toil the *Resurrection* on the East wall shows each man laying down his burden, depositing his cross with Christ – as though on some celestial rubbish-heap – and wandering unhurriedly towards a high, distant horizon.

Here, for once in Spencer's painting, is serenity. The superficial resemblance to Breughel breaks down. That robust appetite for the attractive details of life on which both artists built up their busy, complicated pattern is still there, but into it is woven something deeper. Exactly what that something is I find it difficult to define. I believe it to be a kind of universal human sympathy, and the difficulty of defining it is the same as the difficulty of defining just what makes the Sermon on the Mount something more than a set of moral precepts. Human sympathy of this kind cannot be labelled and put into a bottle. It is a mystery. Without it the philosopher's wisdom and the artist's penetration are both cold and uninspiring. This human sympathy—this feeling that men and mules are tortoises and scorpions are all members of a great restless family who will one day have no further need to carry intolerable burdens, or wound each other, or tend each other's wounds, but will be free to stroll lazily towards a desirable horizon, becomes all the more poignant in the Burghclere *Resurrection* because of the contrast with the burdened action of the side walls.

Burghclere is not Spencer's most perfect creation, but it is his completest. Had he never painted it he would be an imaginative artist of unusual but uncomfortable intensity. Burghclere puts him into a new category. It puts him into the category of the fresco painters of fifteenth-century Florence. True, at Burghclere, their native Italian Classic grace has been exchanged for a North European Gothic whimsy, but Spencer is no longer a creator of hectic little masterpieces like items in a firework display. His creative spirit burns with a steady glow. One can compare him with an imaginary painter of the Early Renaissance, a man endowed with a little of Masaccio's simple grandeur and some of Ghirlandajo's prosaic charm, mingled with his own native enthusiasm. Burghclere makes the comparison possible.

Eric Newton

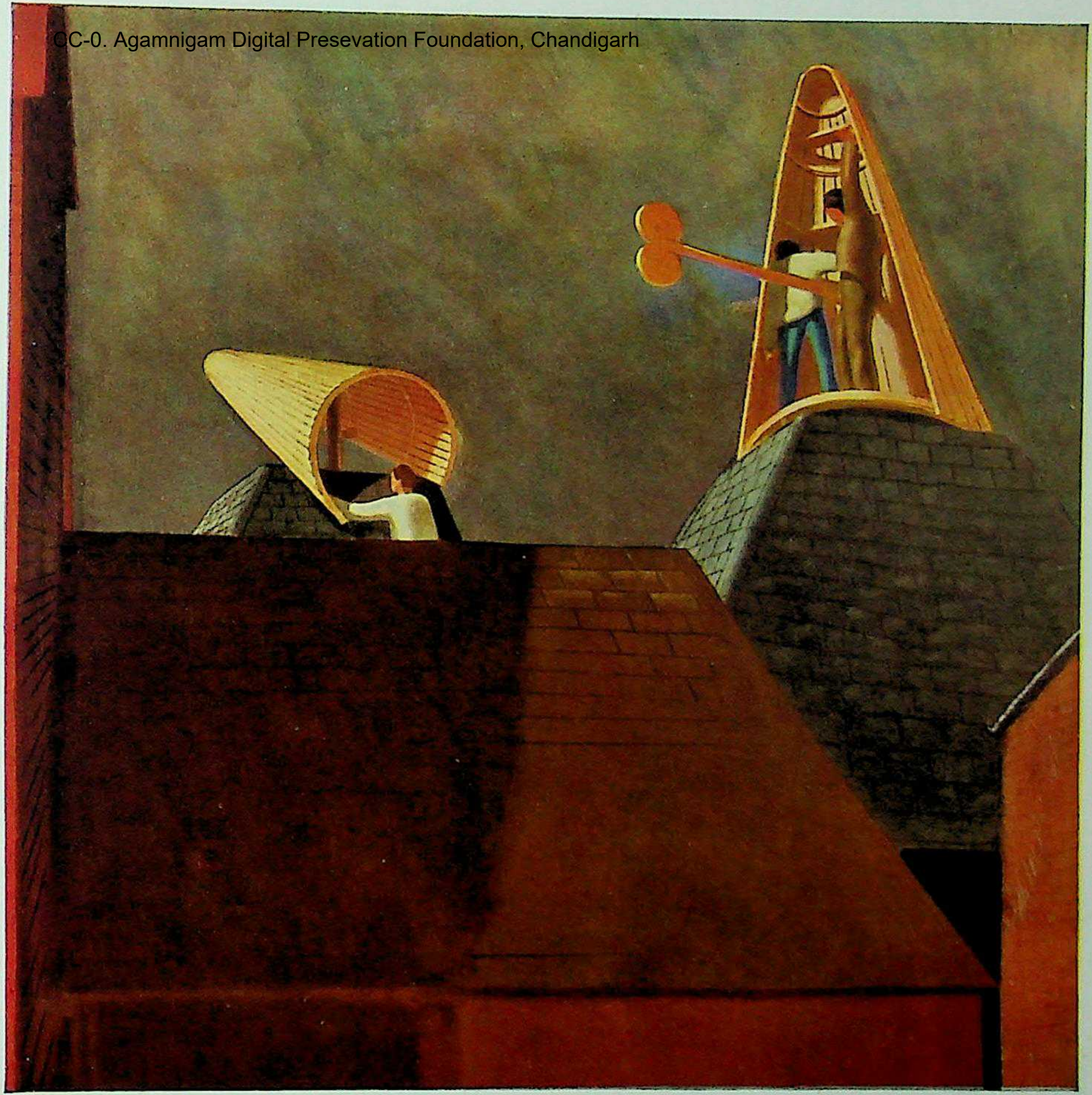


Plate 1 Mending Cowls—Cookham (1914)

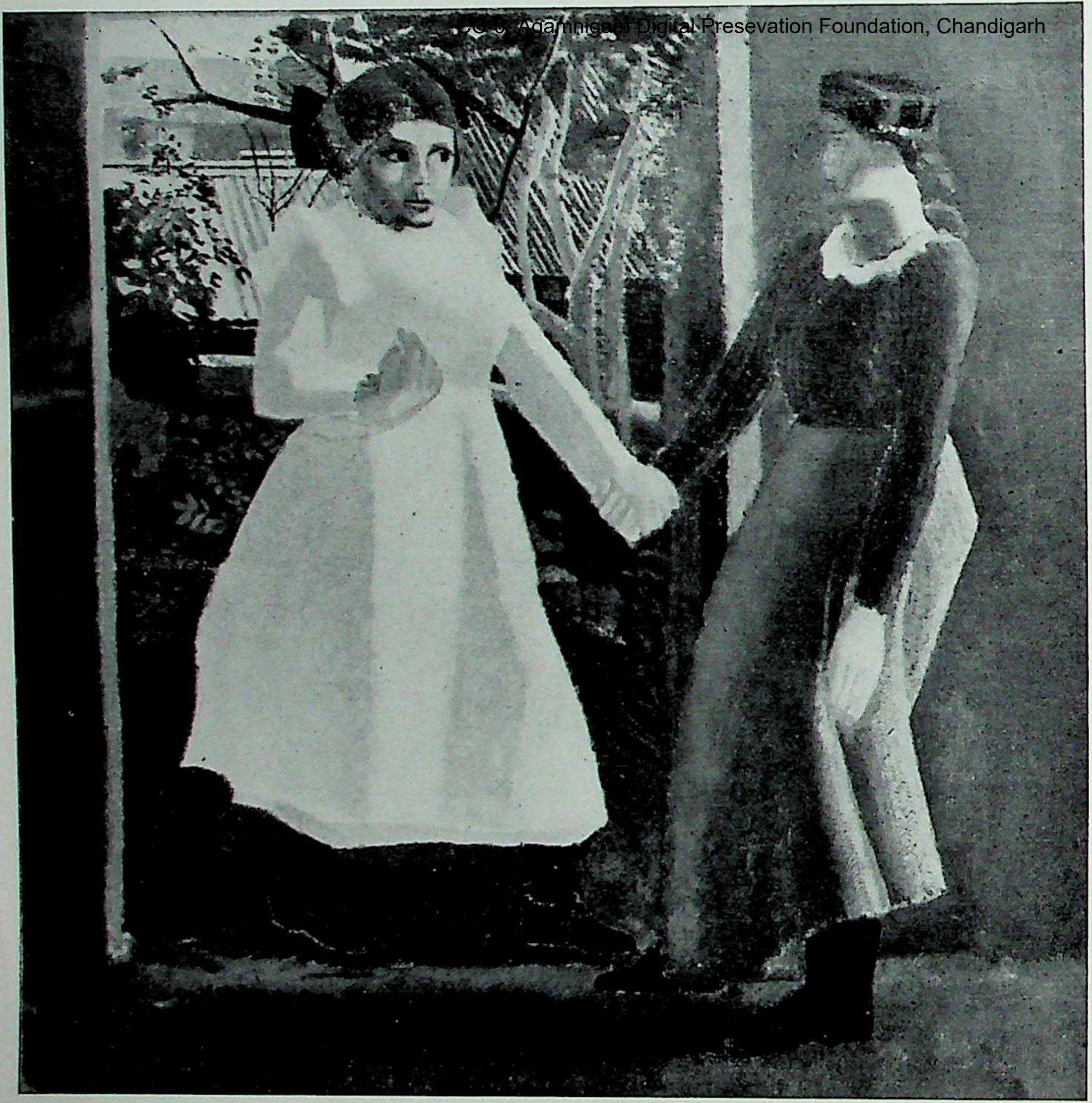
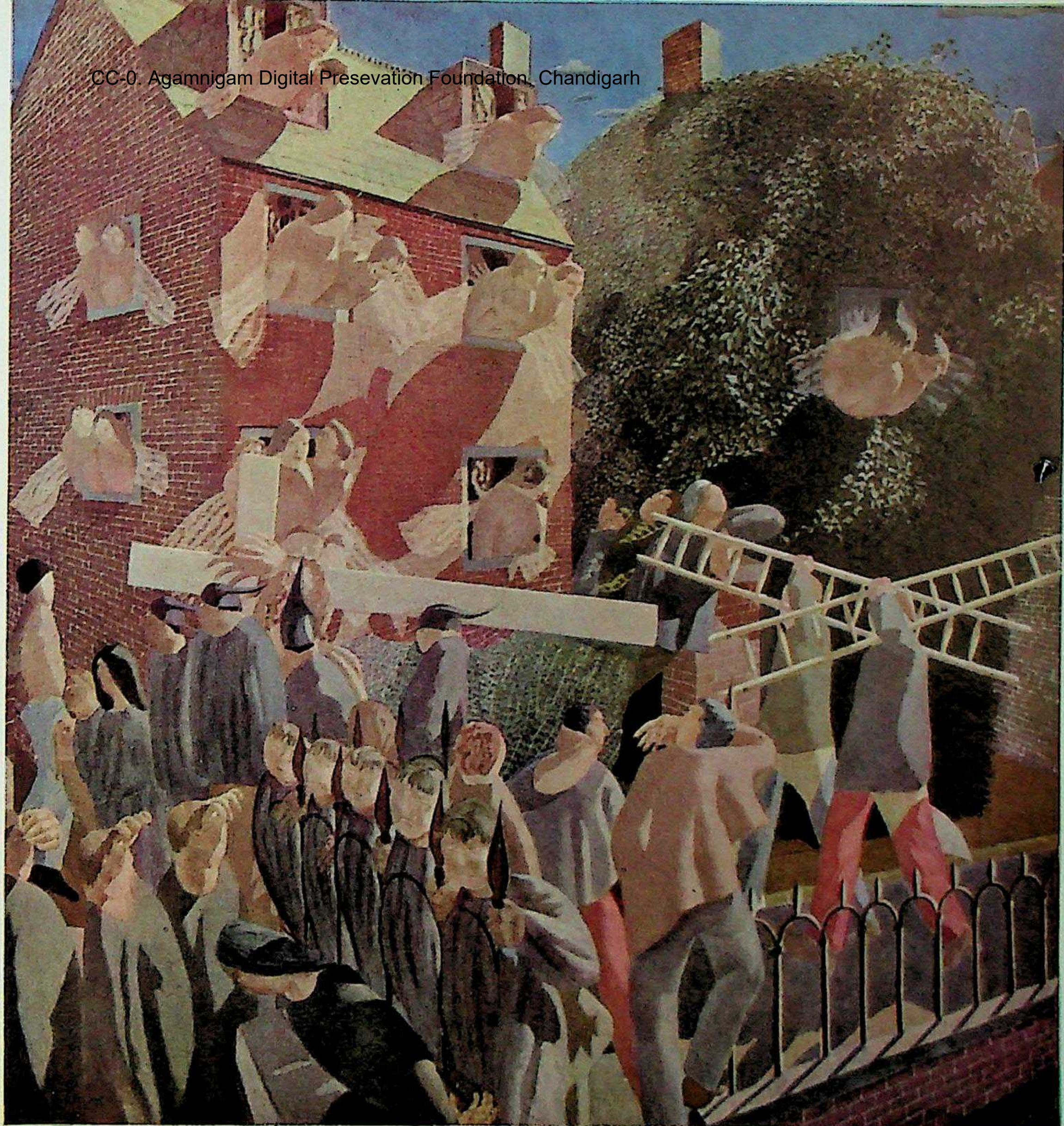
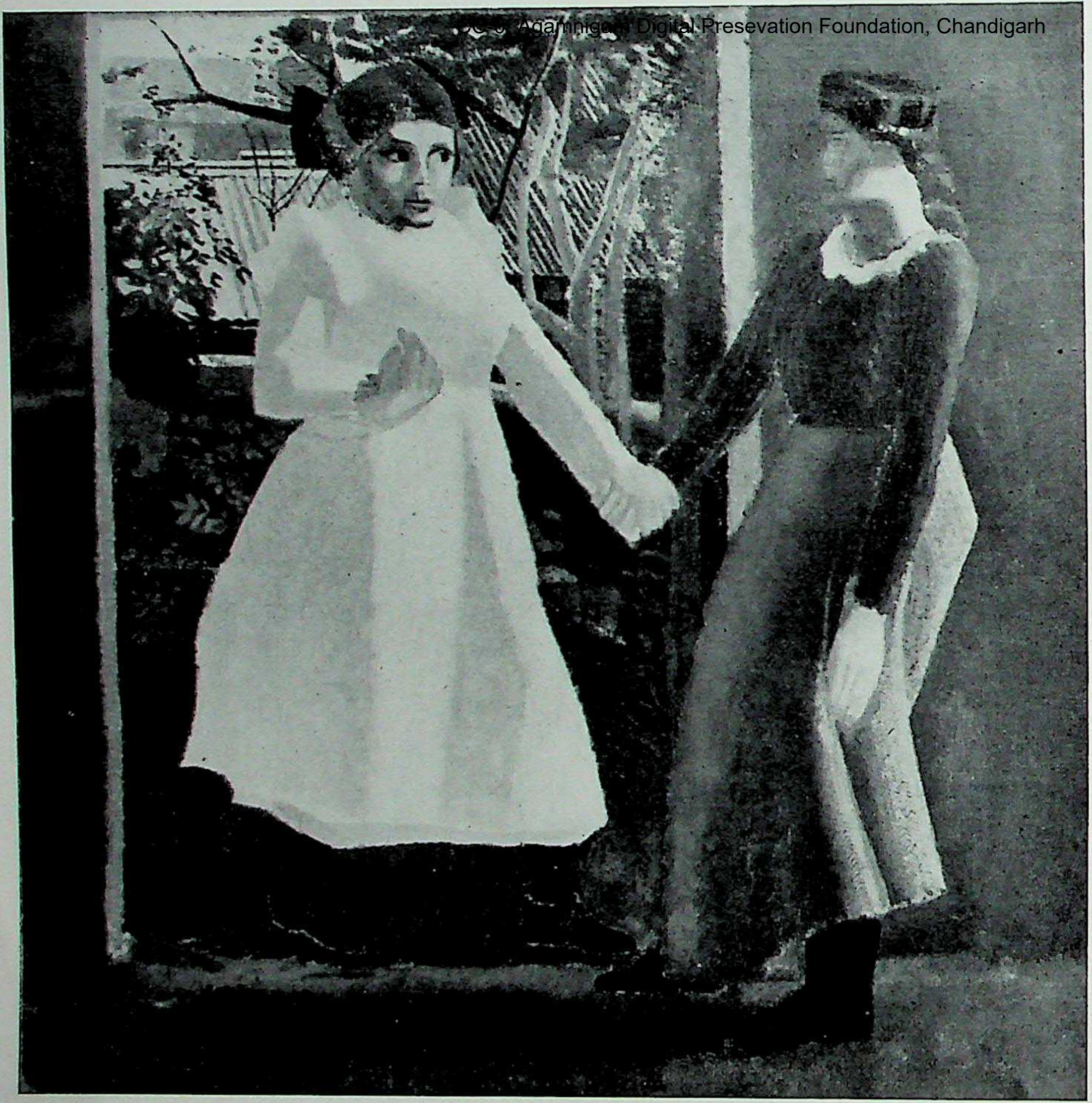


Plate 2 The Visitation (1913).





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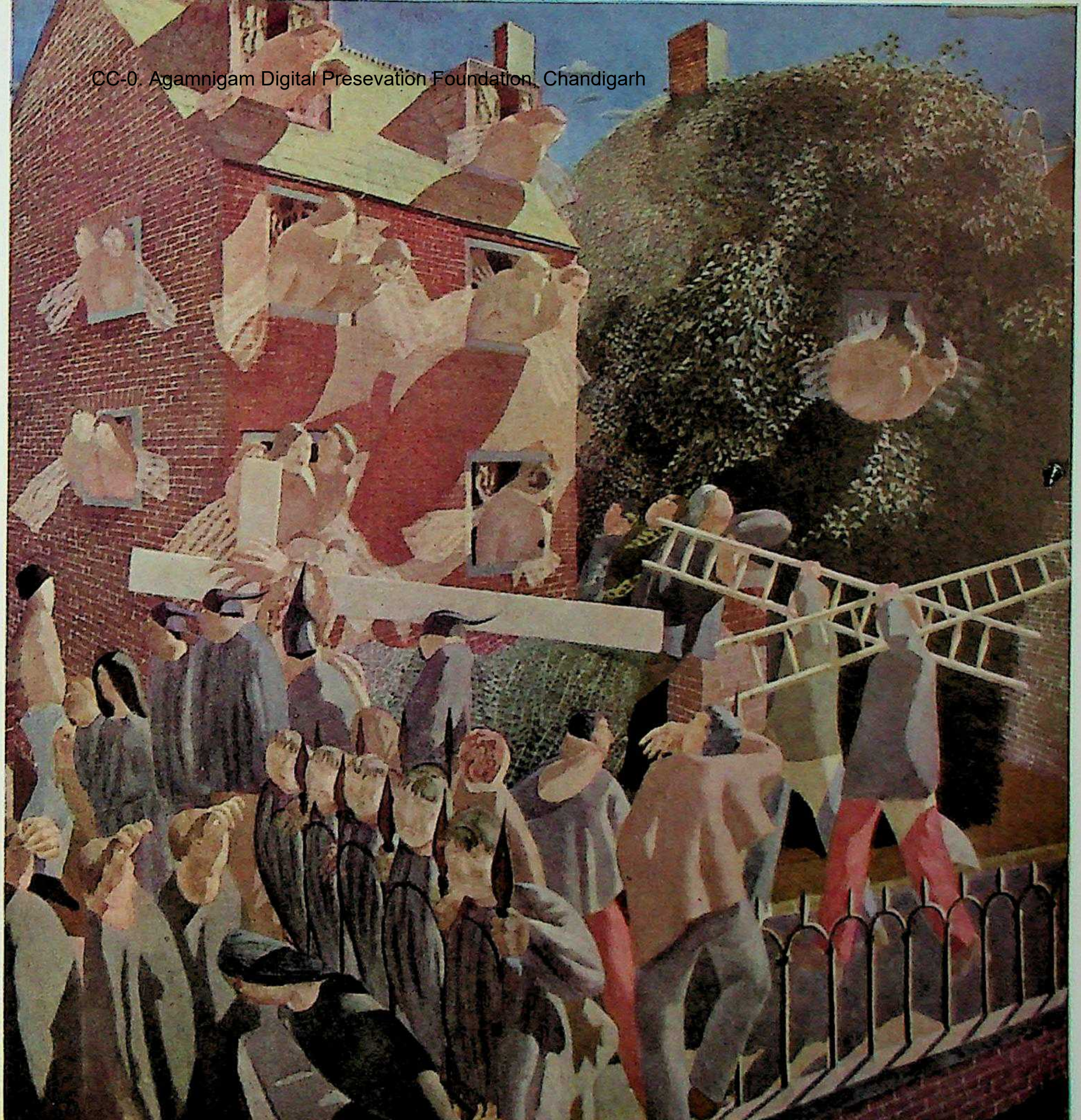

Plate 3 CHRIST CARRYING THE CROSS (1920).

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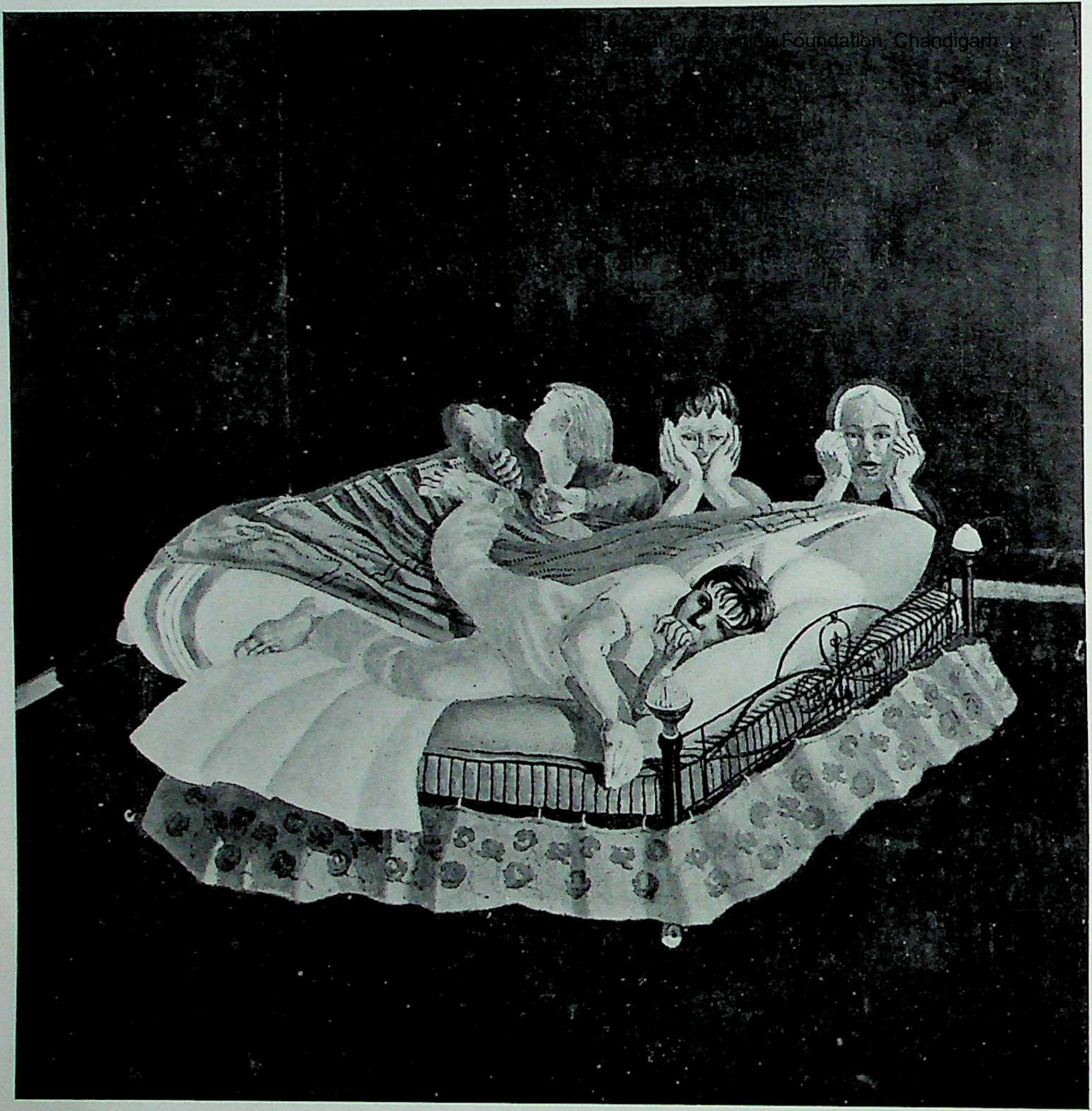

Plate 4 The Centurion's Servant (1915).

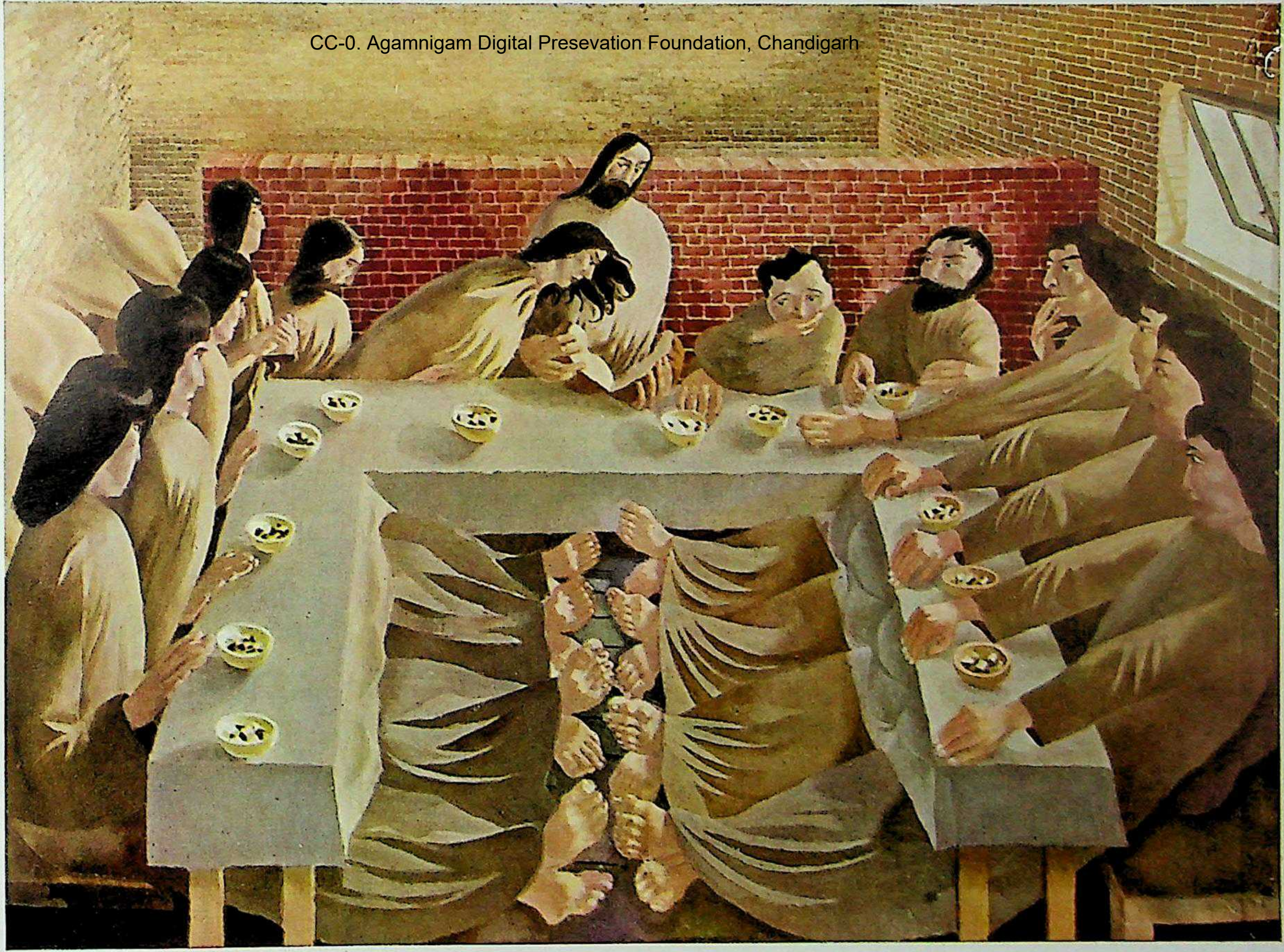

Plate 5 THE LAST SUPPER (1920).

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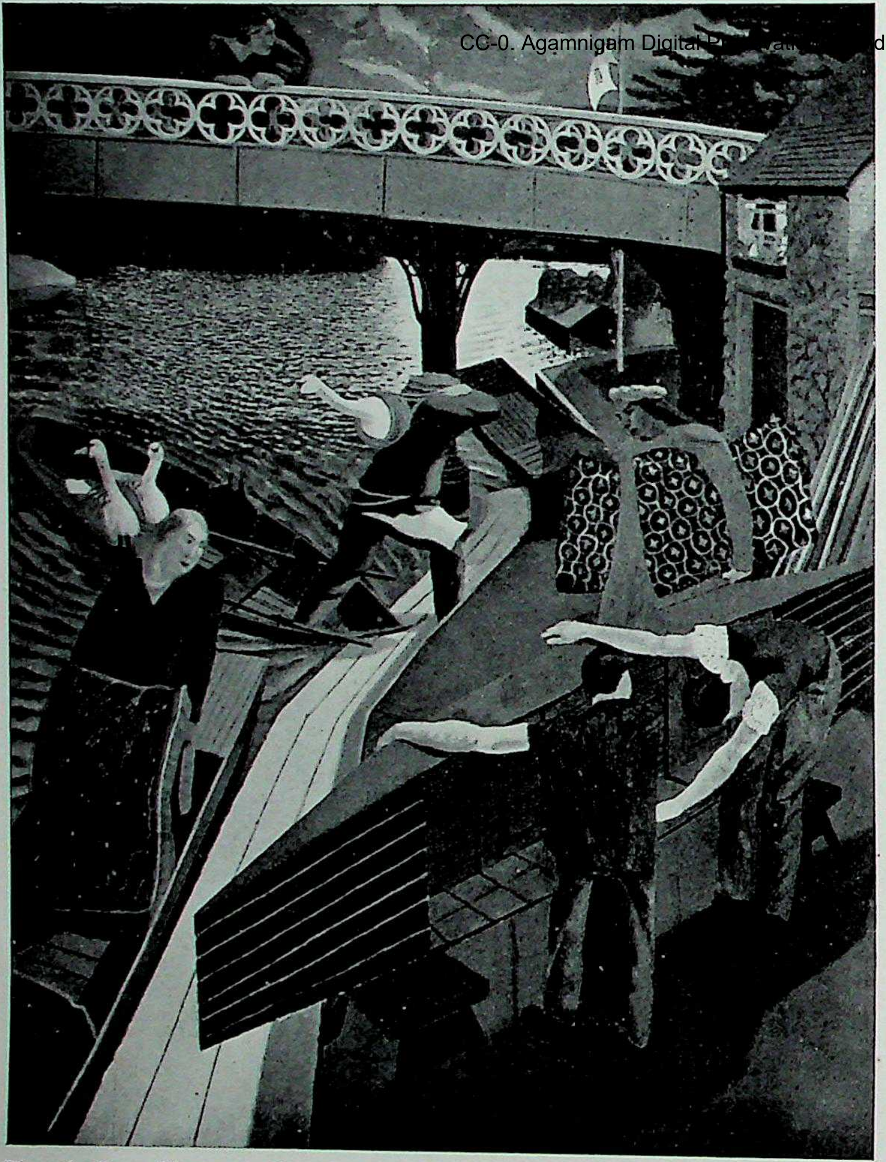

Plate 6 Swan Upping at Cookham (1915).

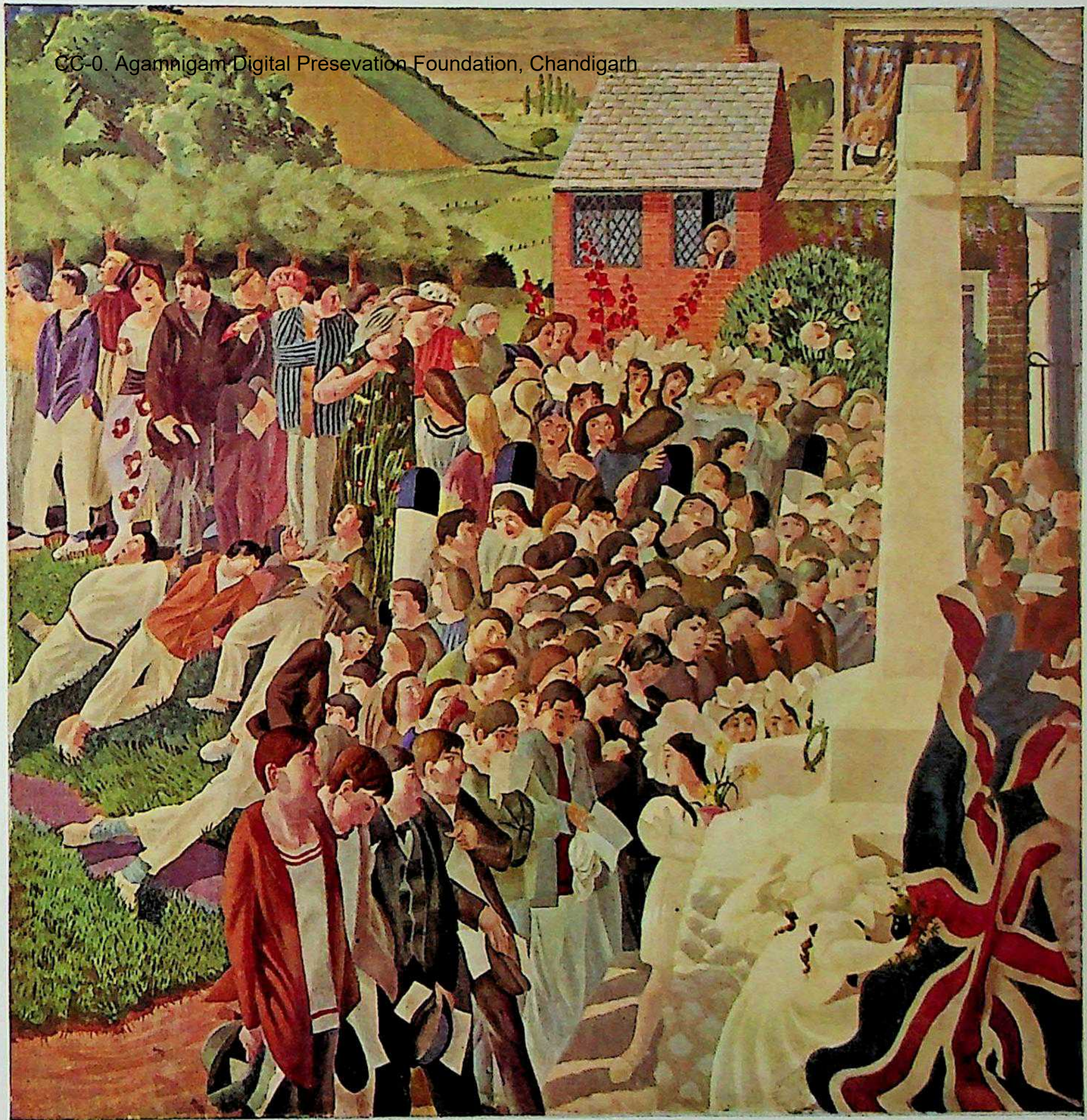

Plate 7 Unveiling Cookham War Memorial (1921).

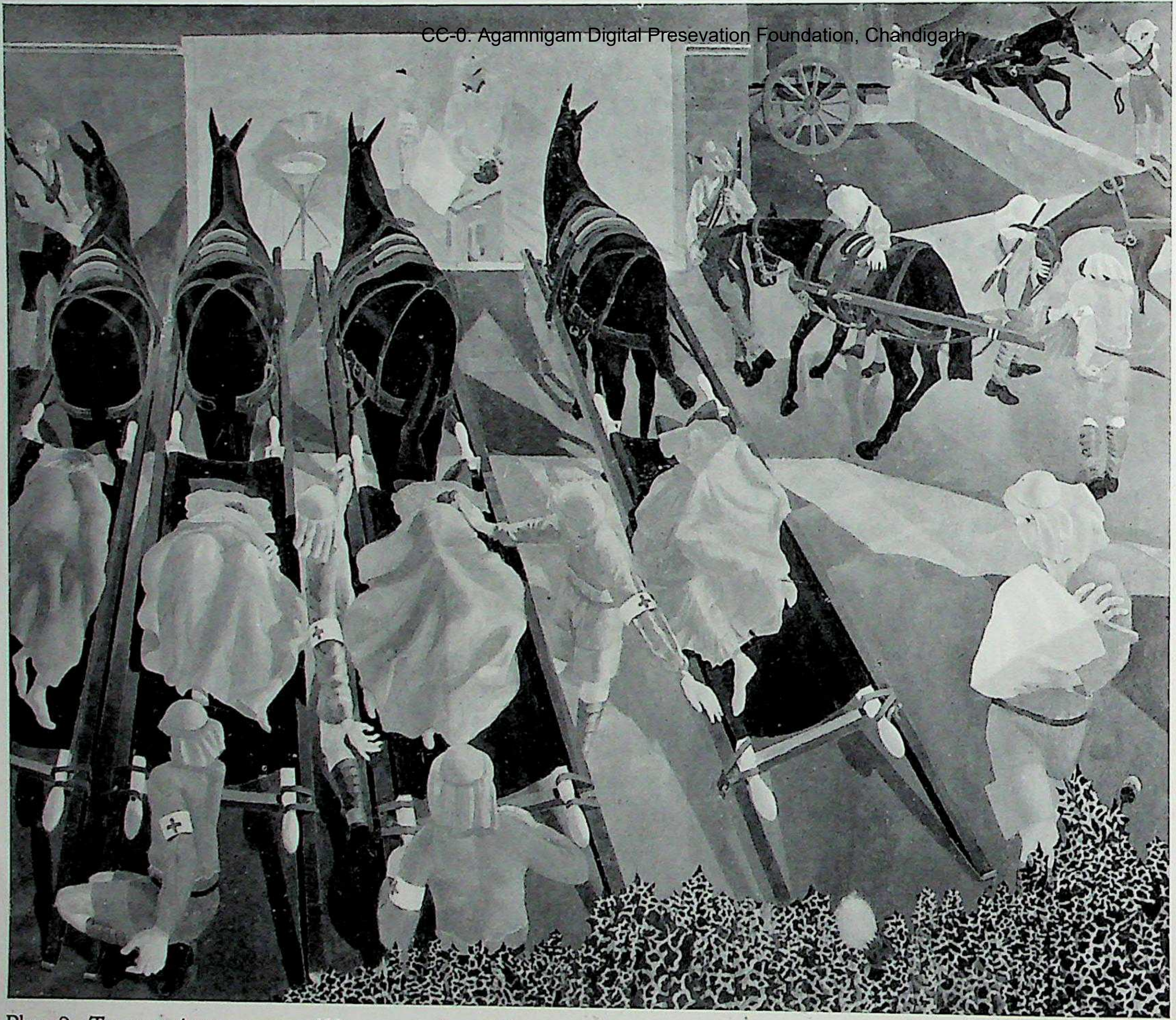

Plate 8 TRAVOYS ARRIVING WITH WOUNDED—SMOL, MACEDONIA (1919).

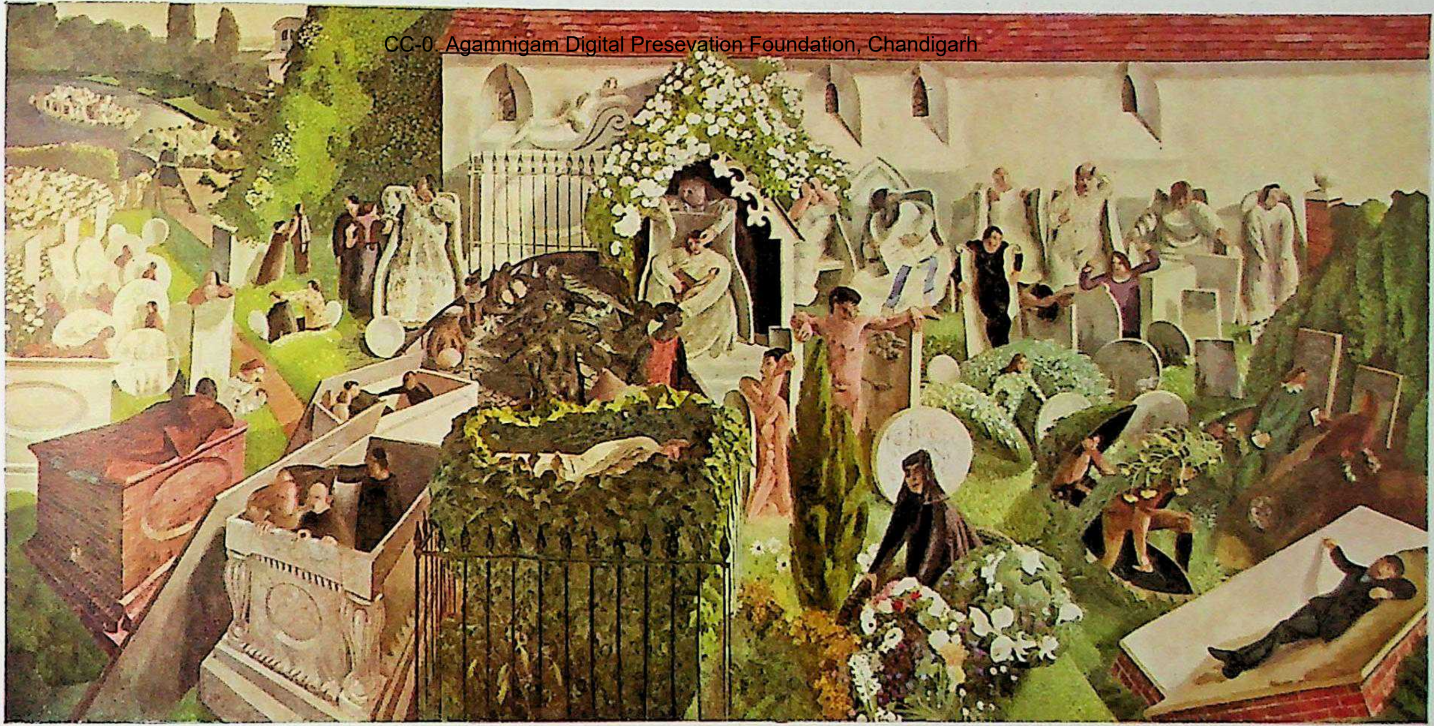

Plate 9 RESURRECTION (1923–6).

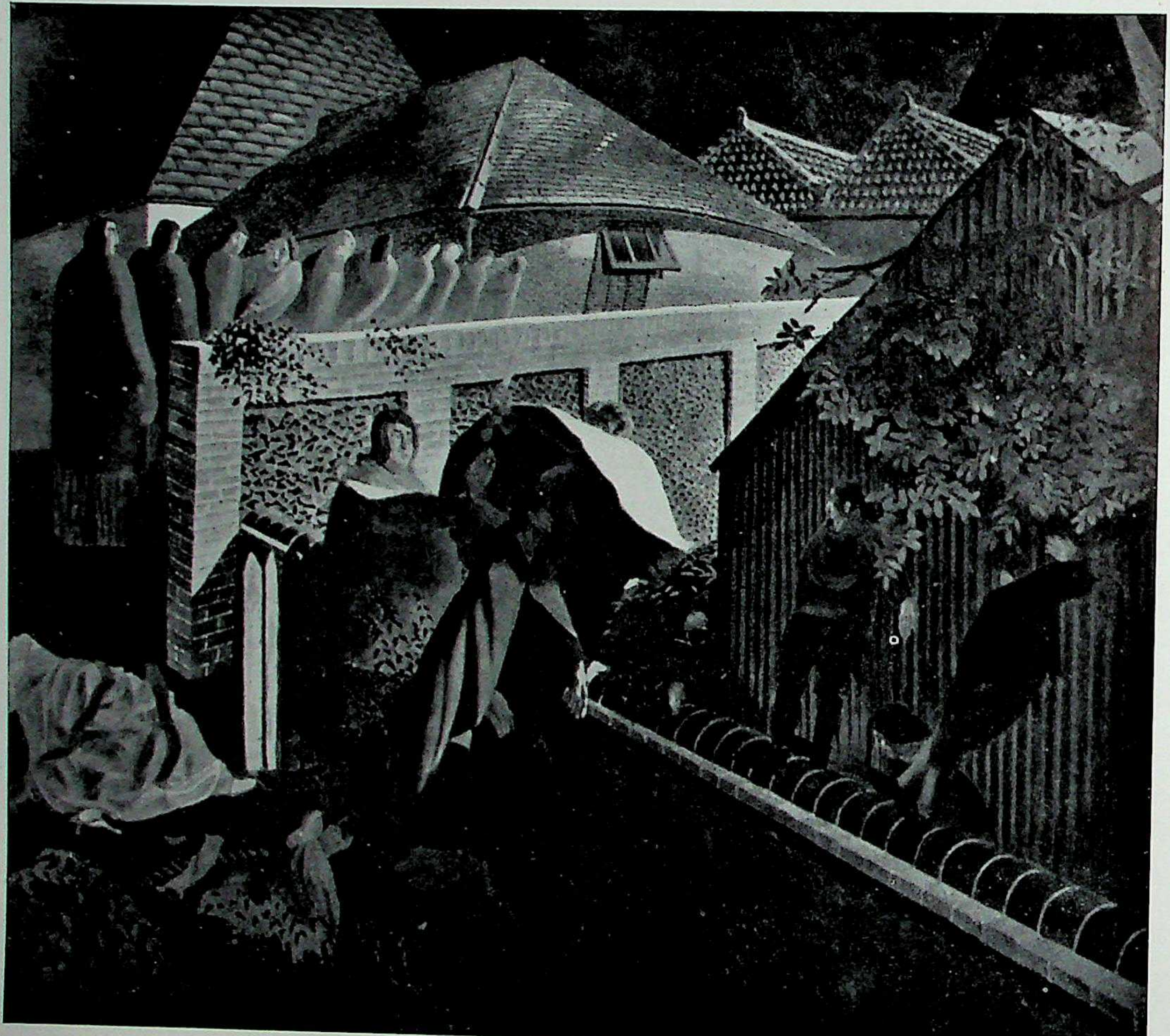

Plate 10 THE BETRAYAL (1922).

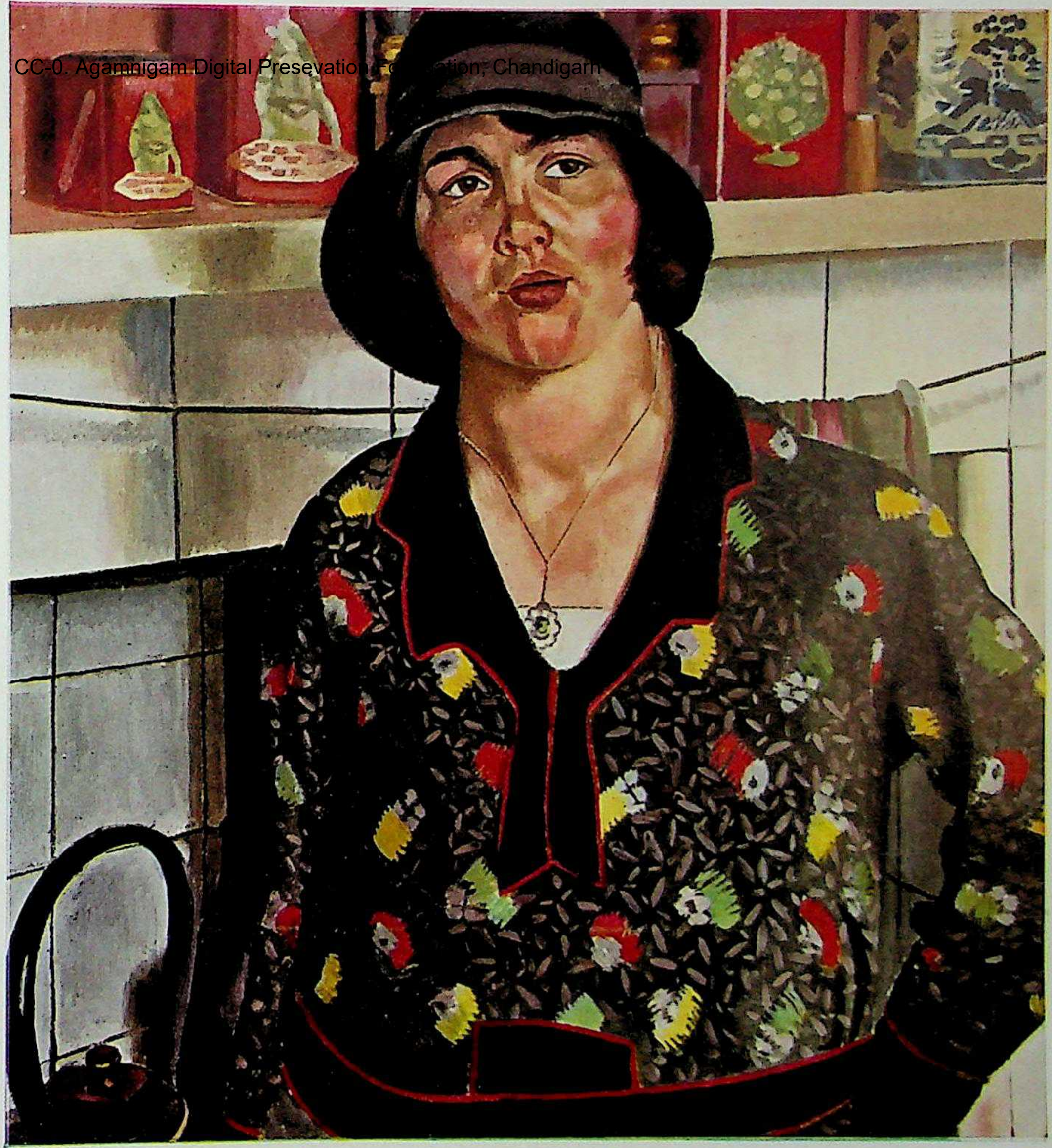

Plate 11 COUNTRY GIRL (1929).

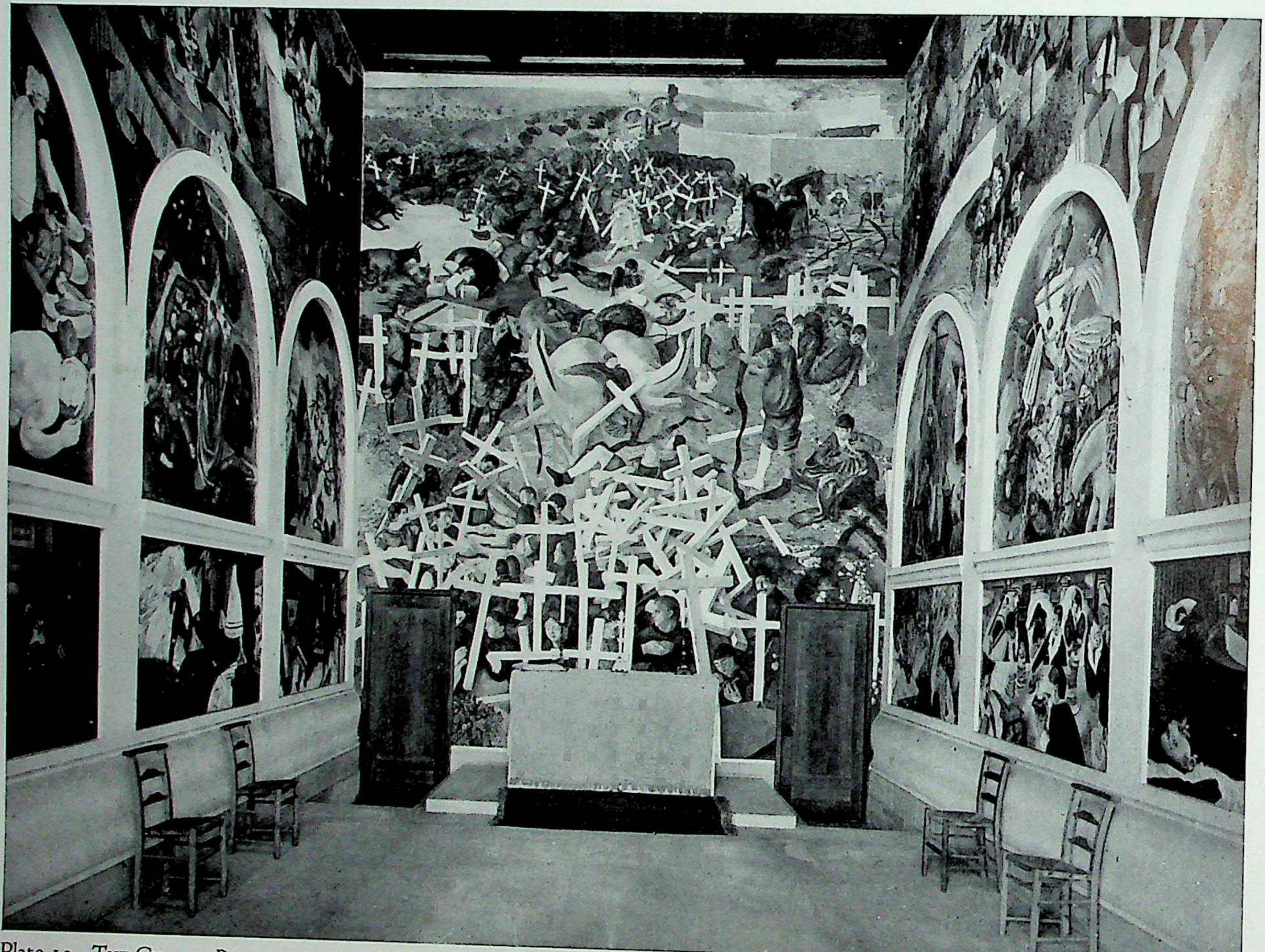

Plate 12 The Chapel, Burghclere, Looking East (1933).

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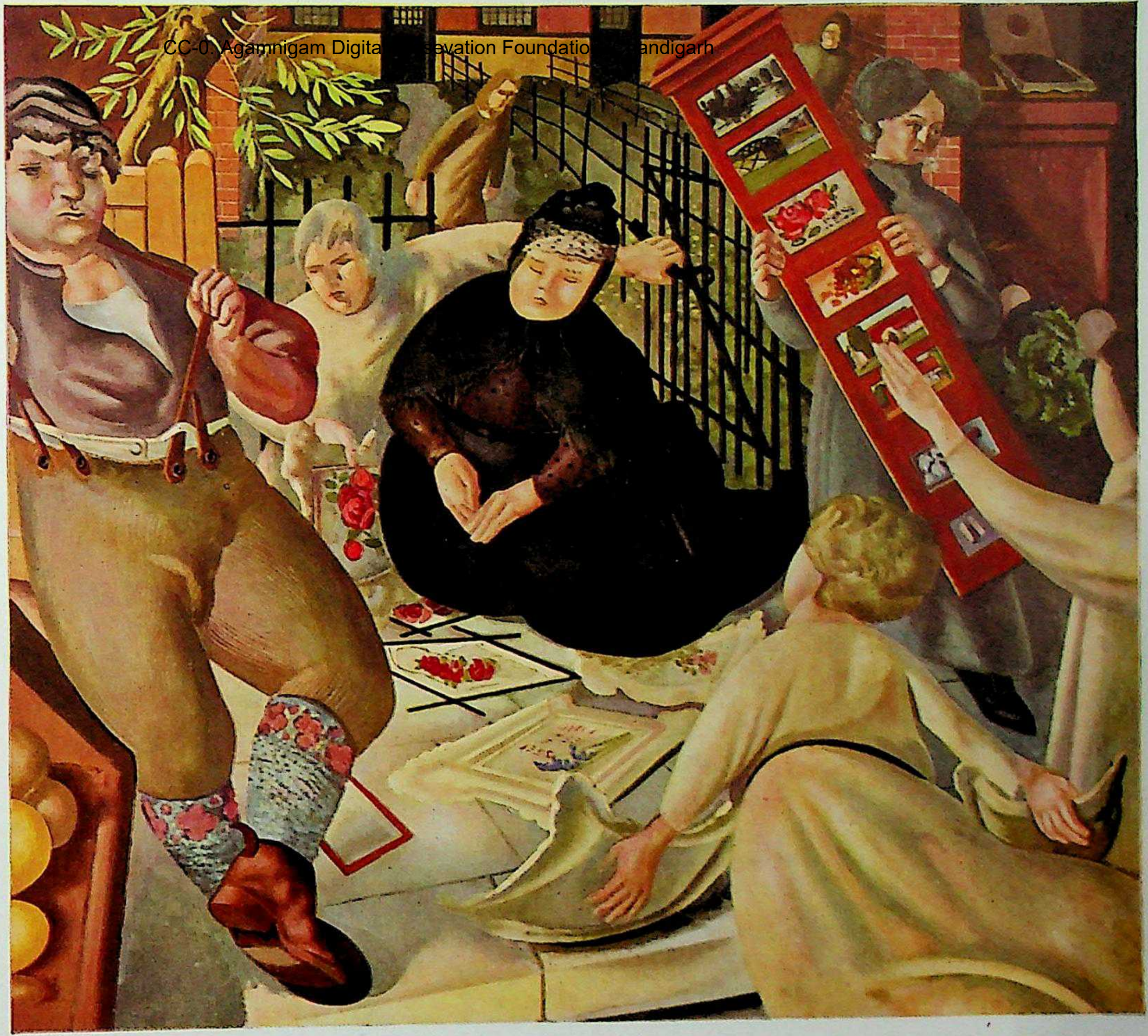

Plate 13 SARAH TUBB AND THE HEAVENLY VISITORS (1934).

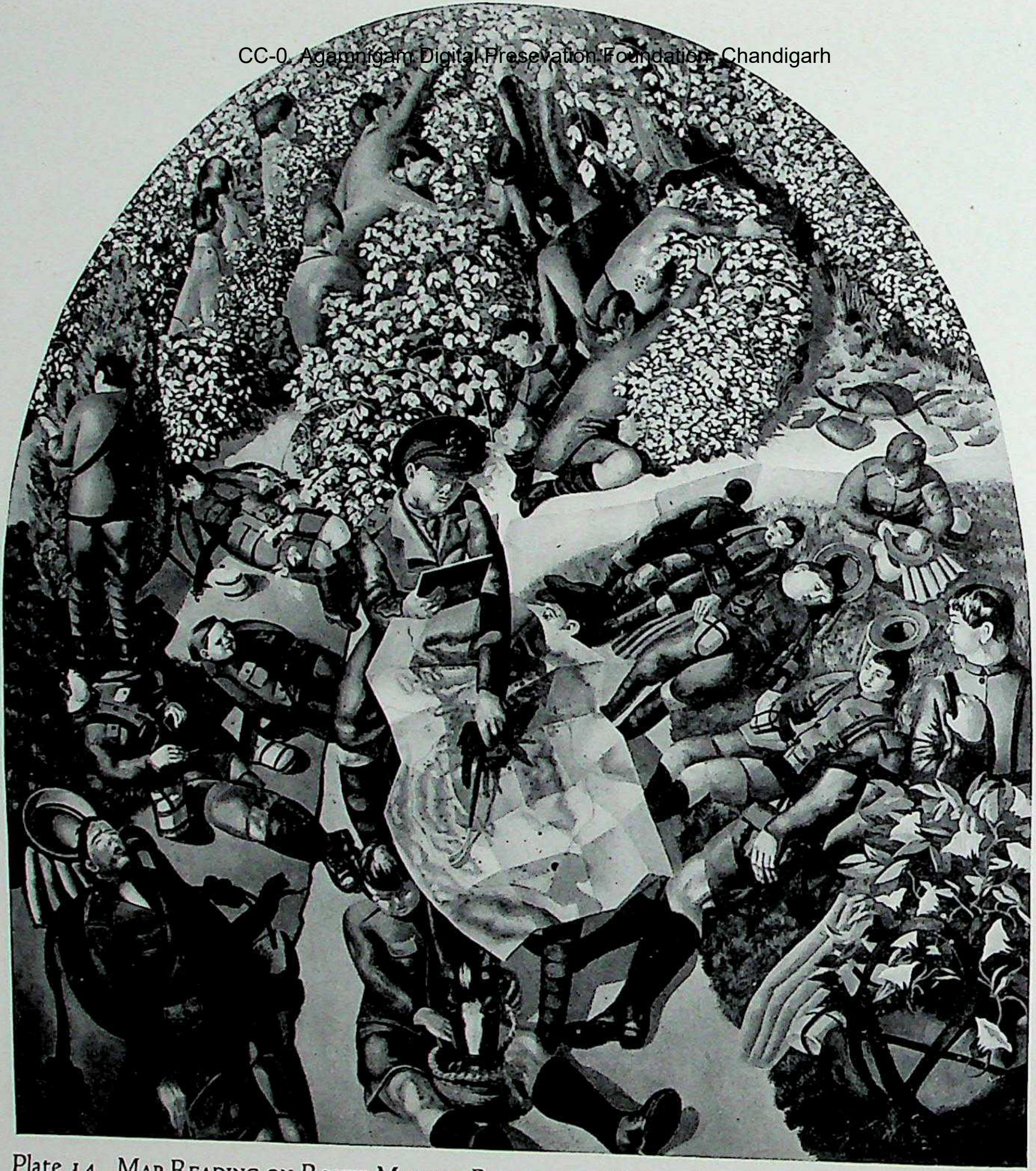

Plate 14 Map Reading on Route March—Burghclere Chapel (1931).

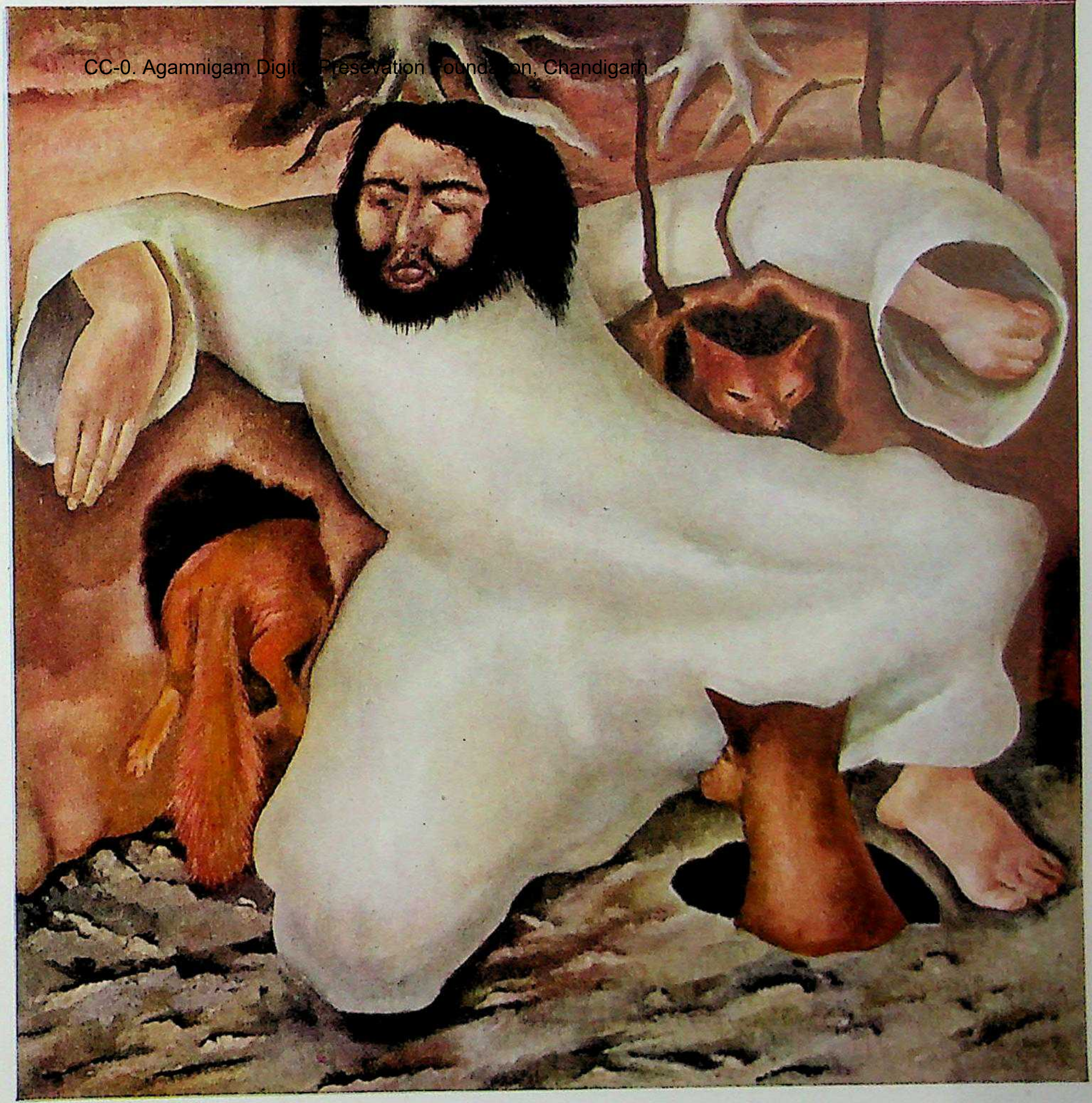

Plate 15 CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS—FOXES (1939).

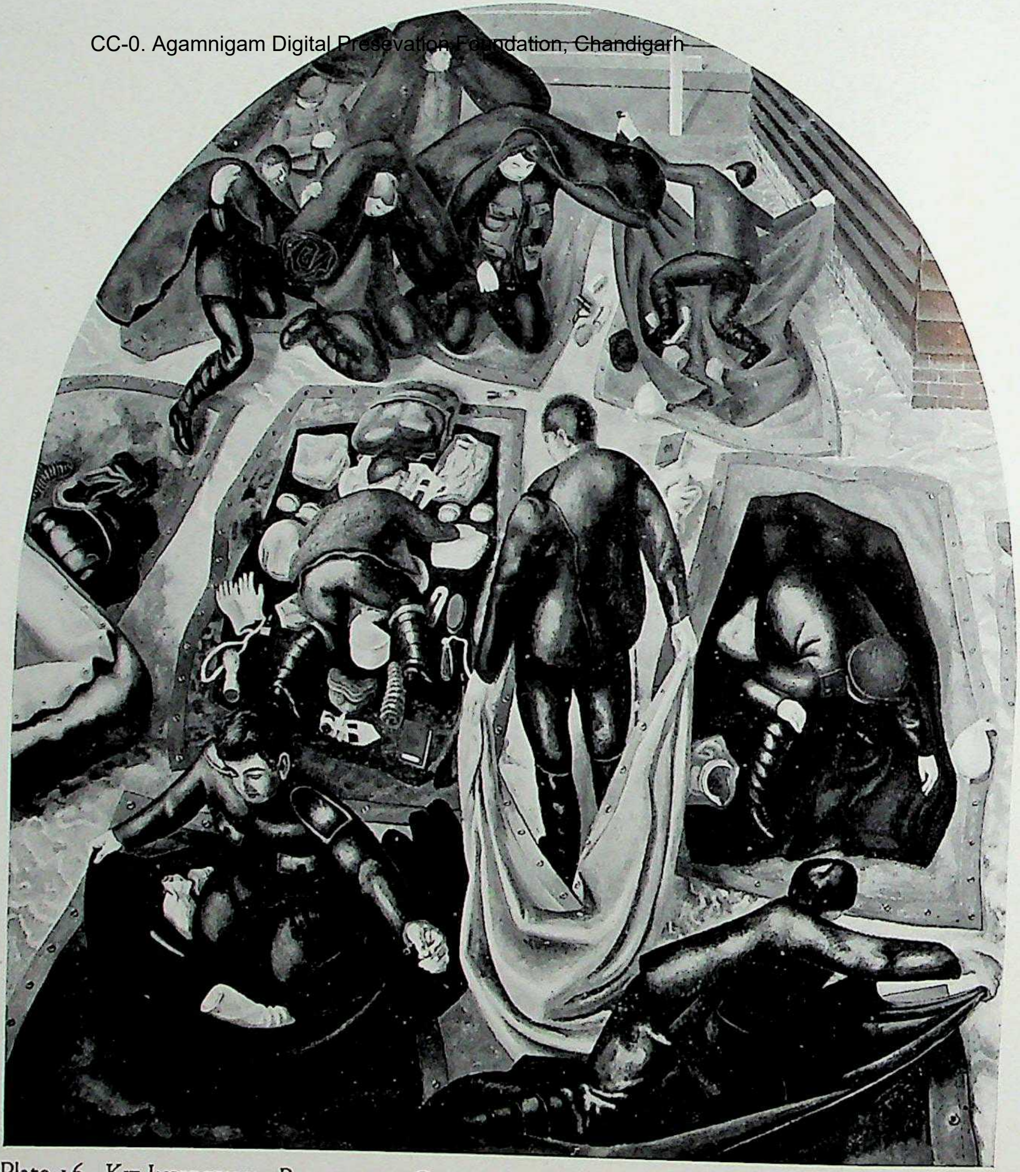

Plate 16 KIT INSPECTION—BURGHCLERE CHAPEL (1932).

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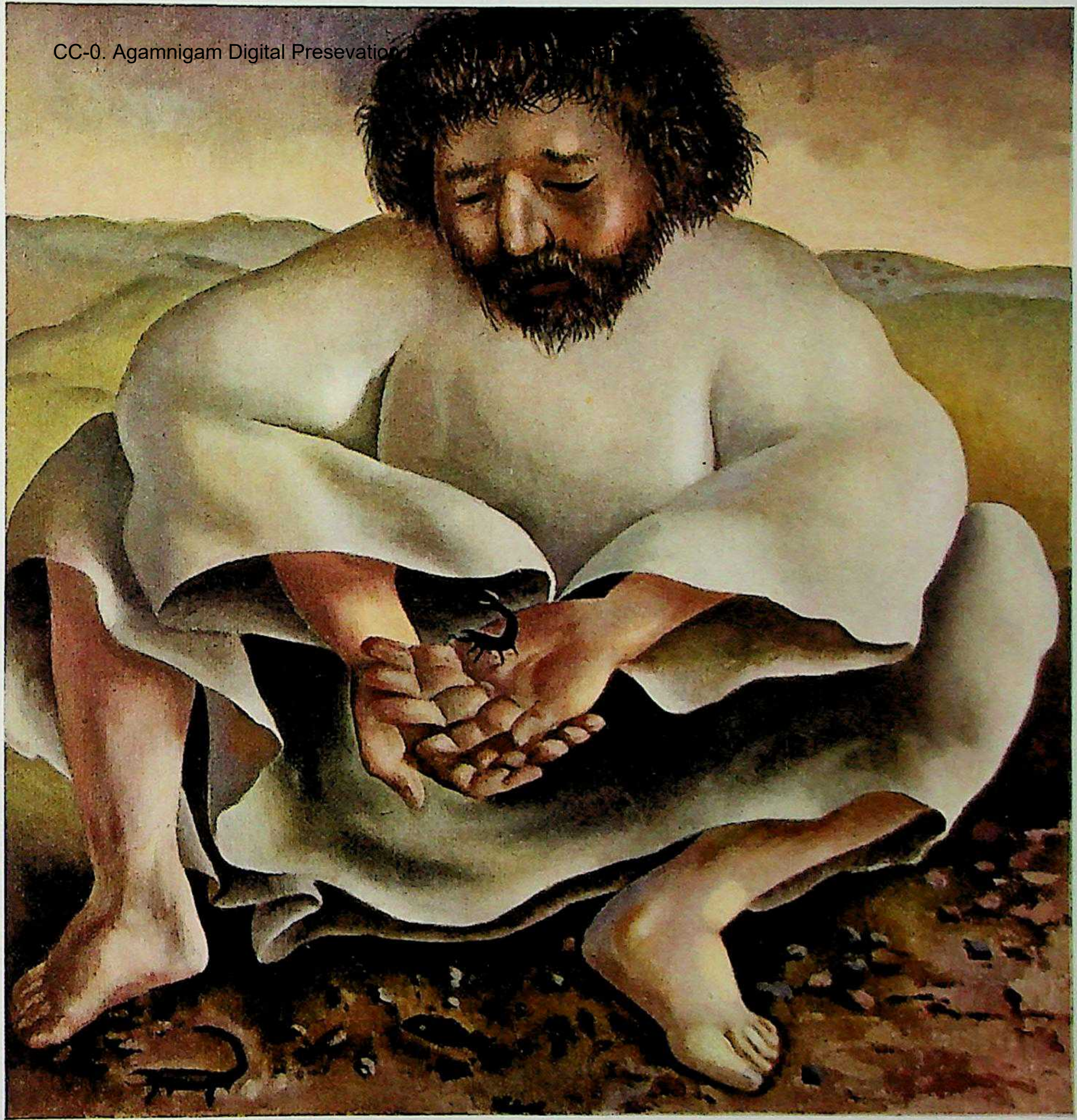

Plate 17 CHRIST IN THE WILDERNESS—SCORPIONS (1939).

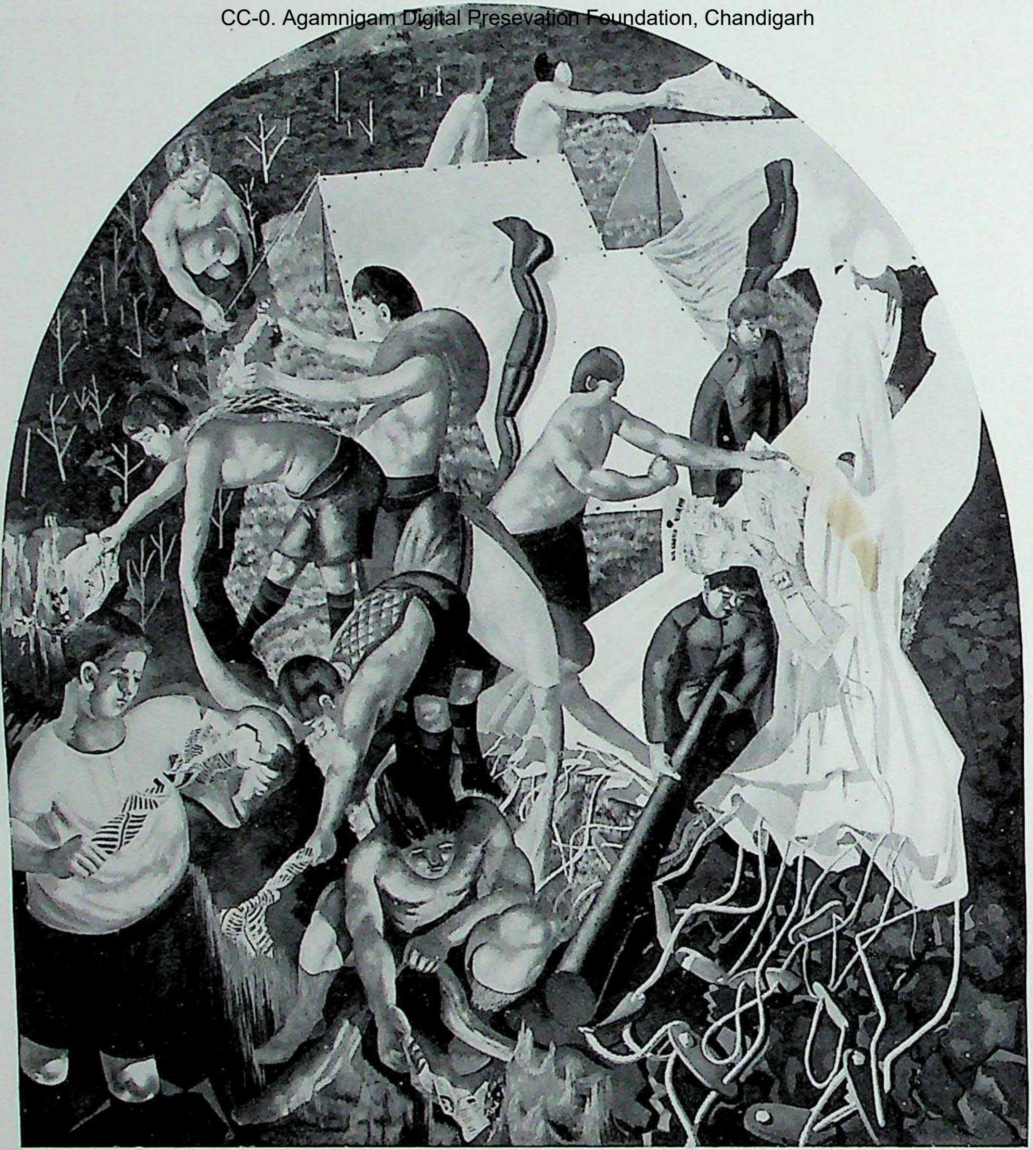

Plate 18 Burning Grass before Bivouacking, Macedonia—Burghclere Chapel (1932)

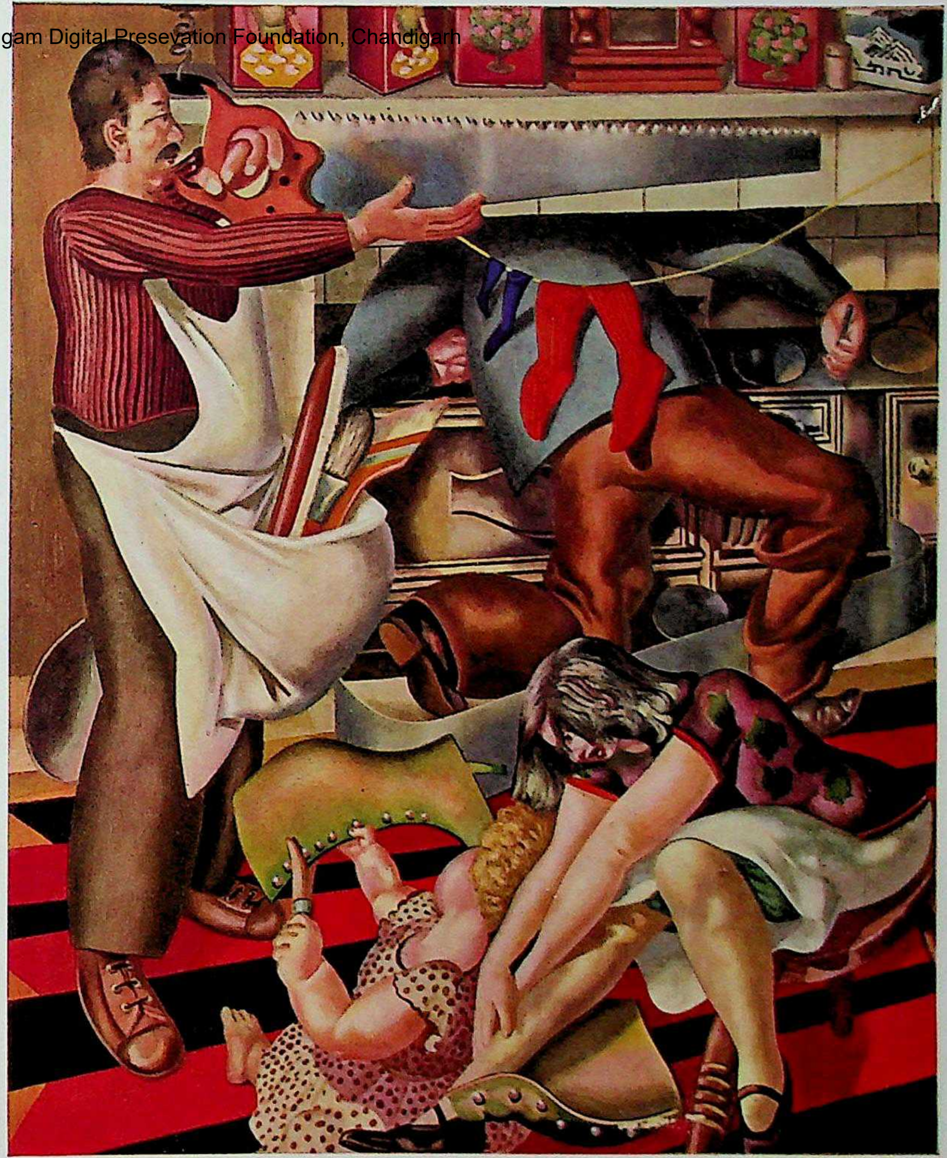

Plate 19 Workmen in the House (1935).

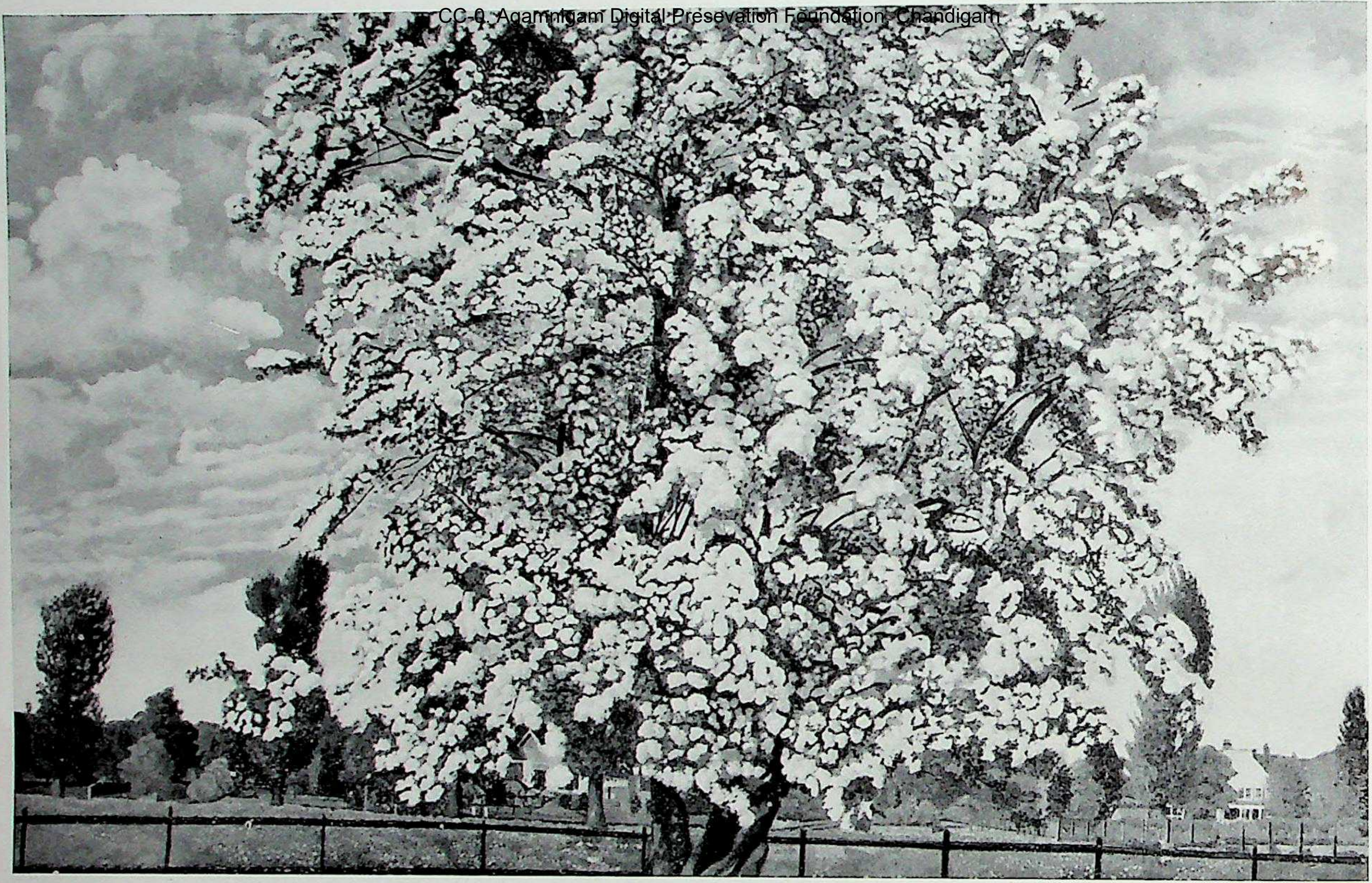

Plate 20 THE MAY TREE (1932).

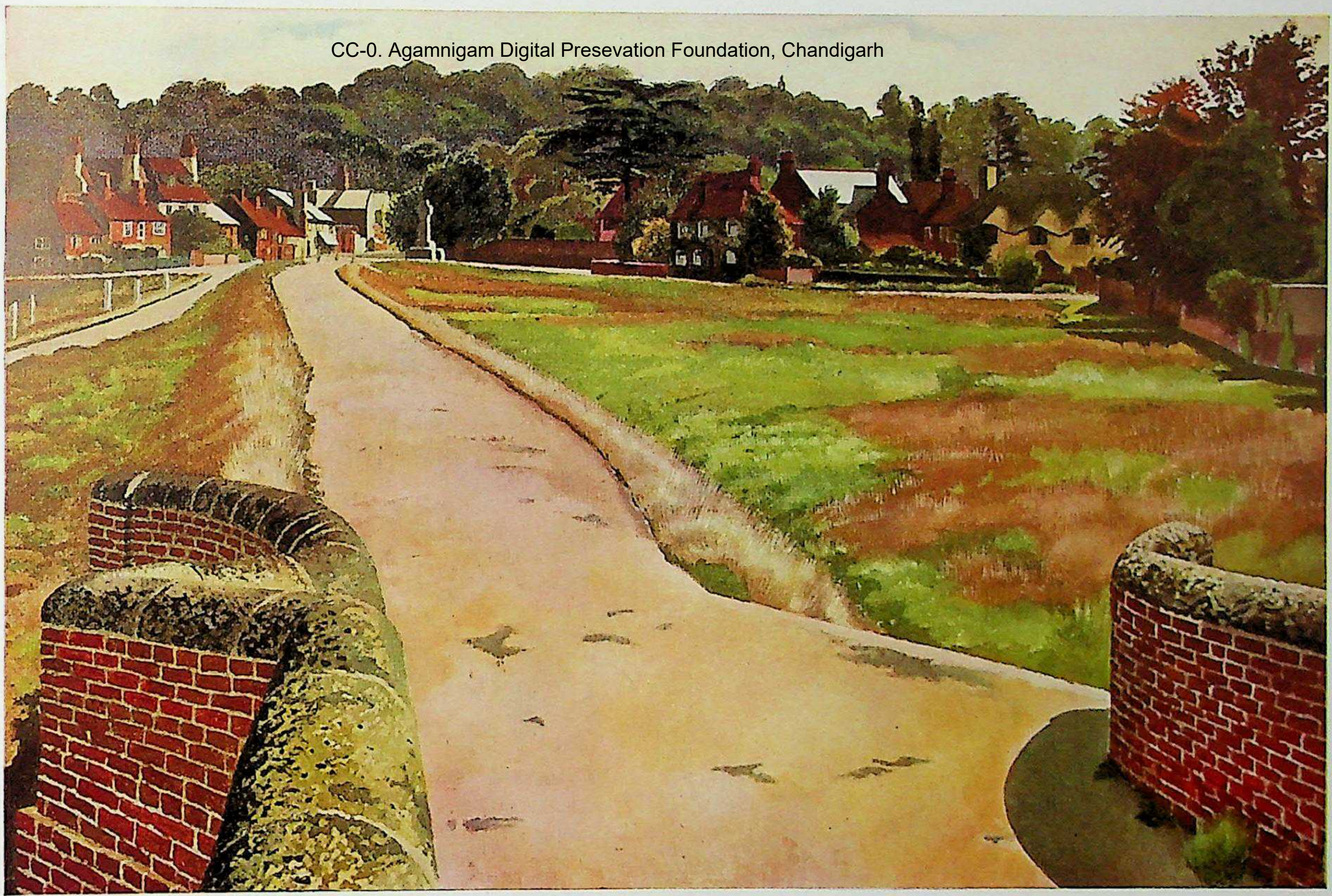

Plate 21 Cookham Moor (1937).

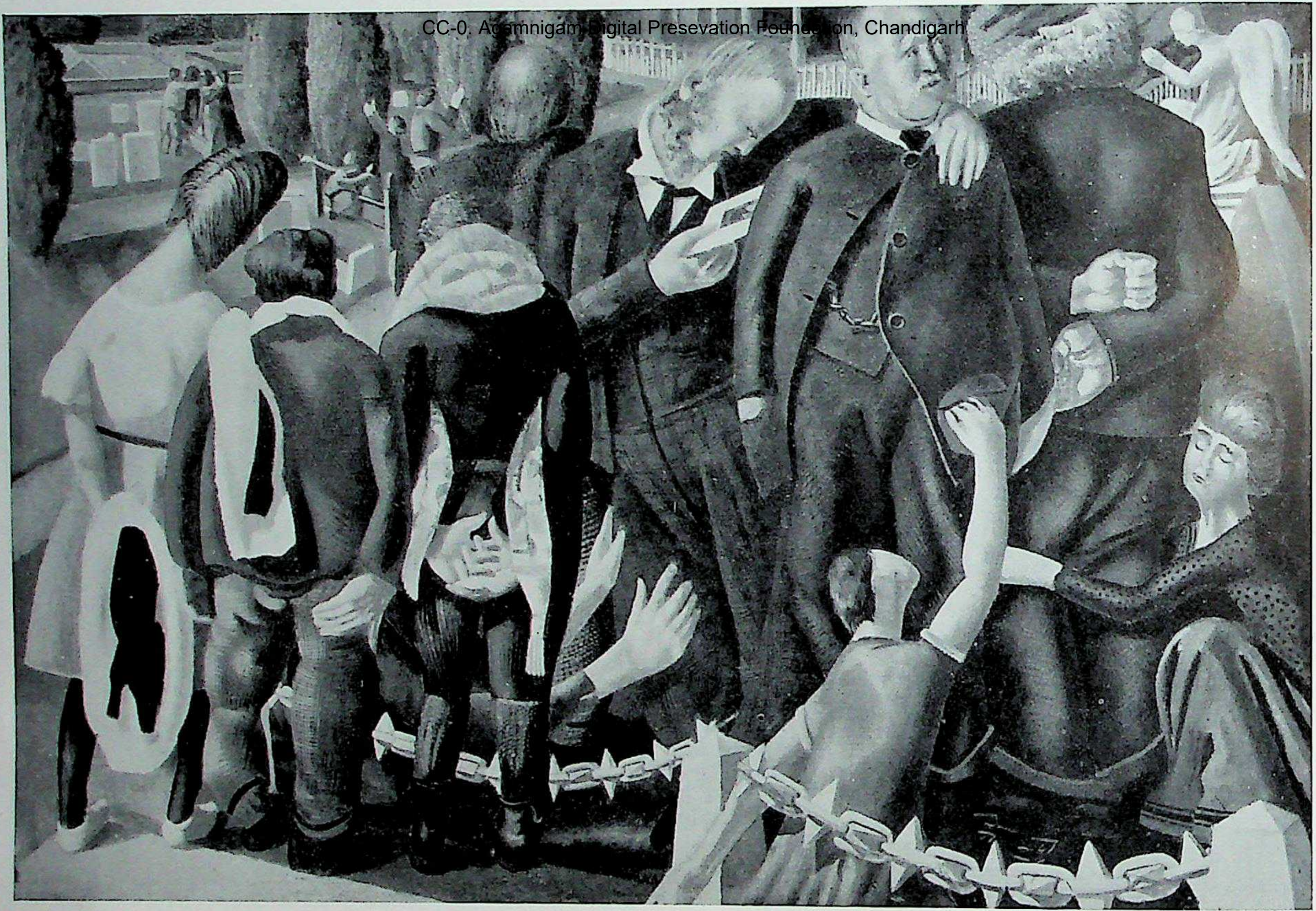

Plate 22 Parents Resurrecting (1933).

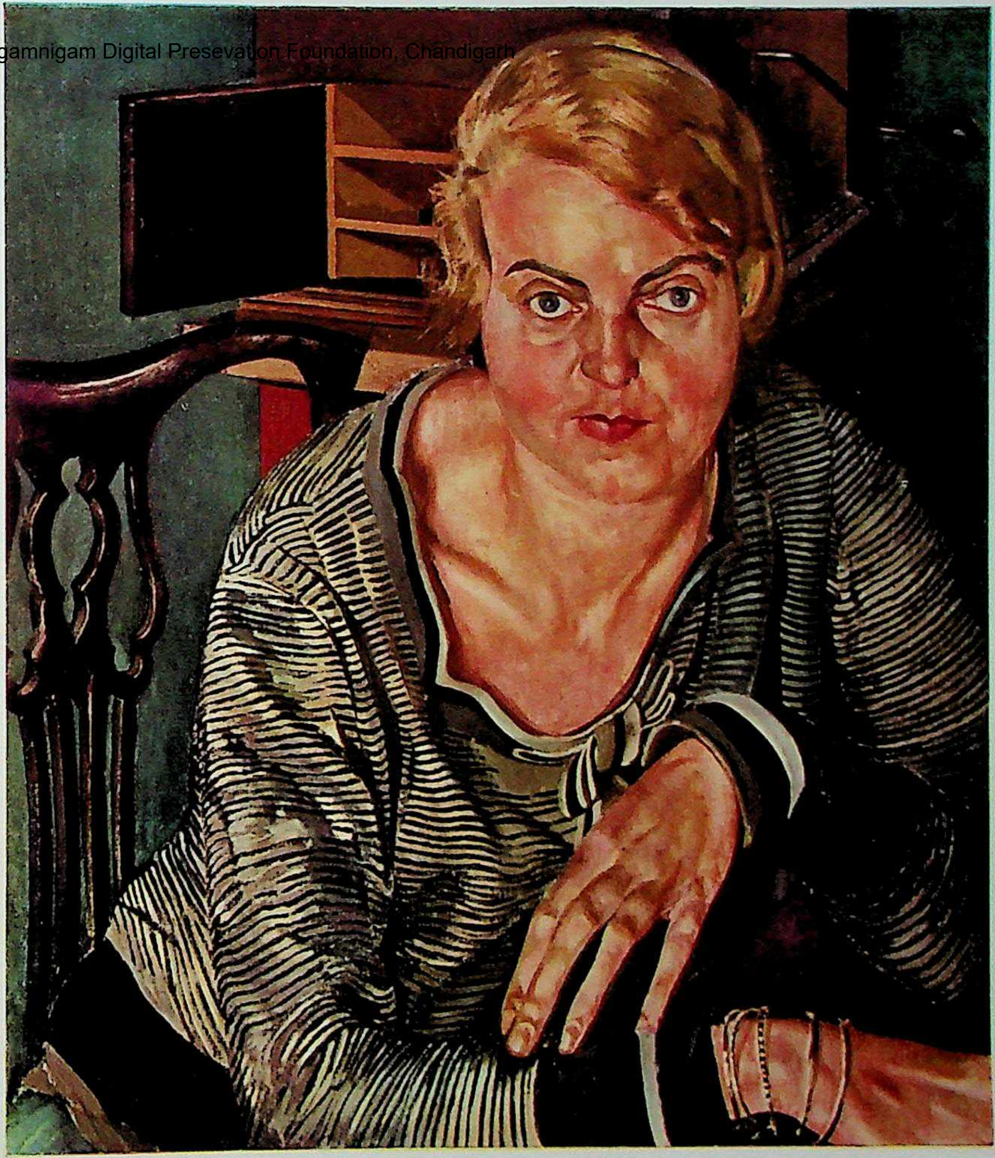

Plate 23 PORTRAIT OF PATRICIA PREECE (1933).

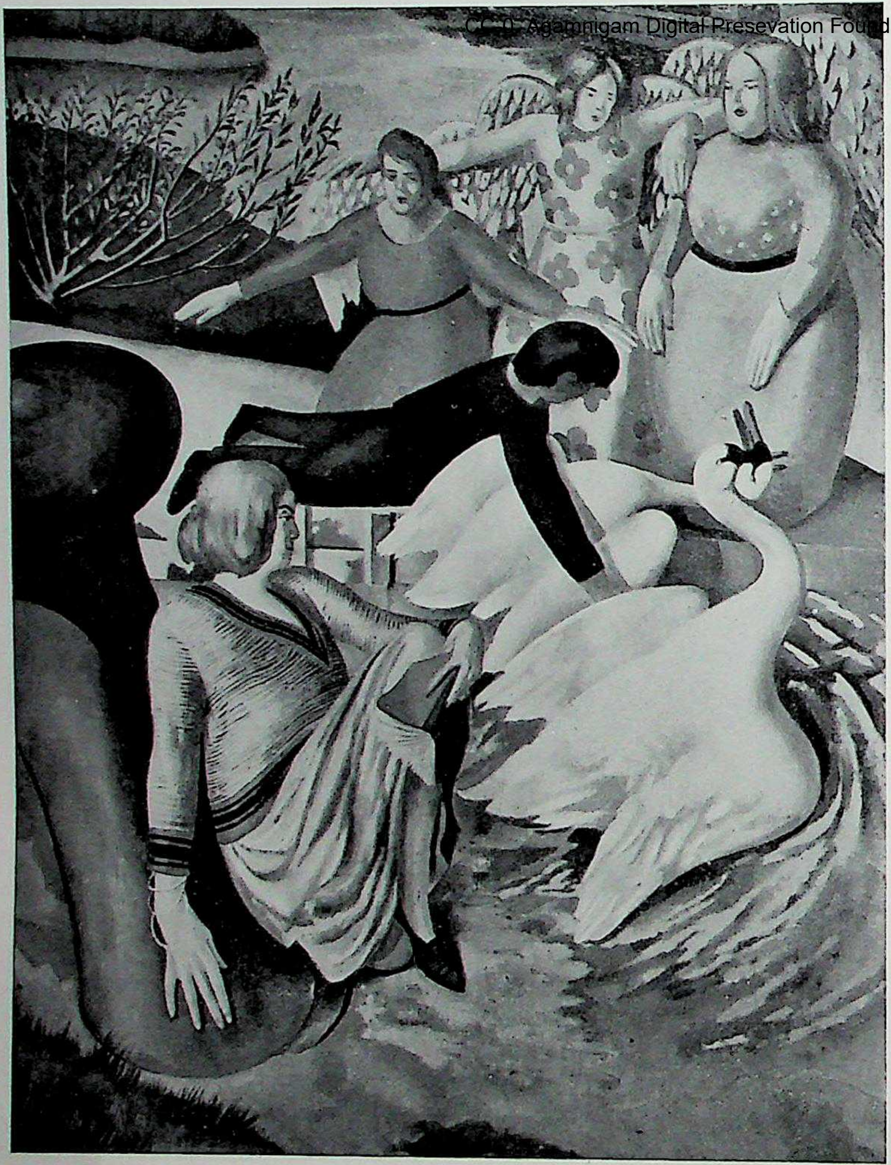

Plate 24 SEPARATING FIGHTING SWANS (1934).

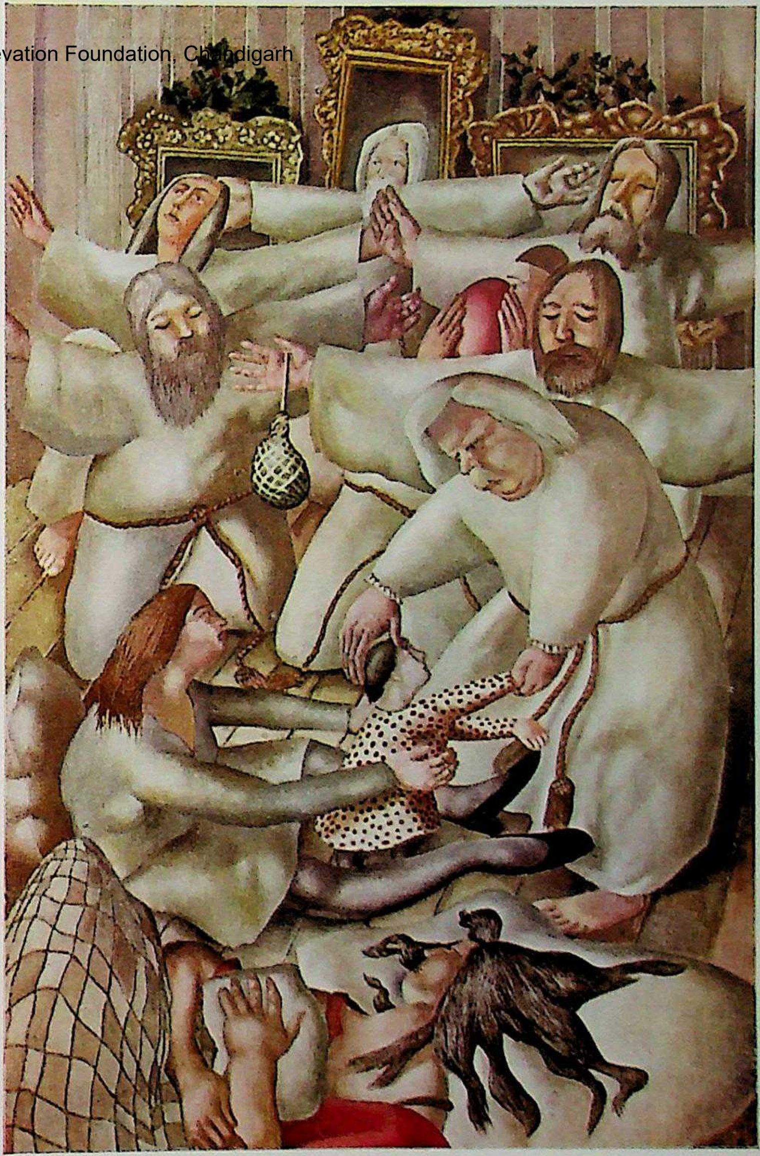

Plate 25 The Coming of the Wise Men (1940).

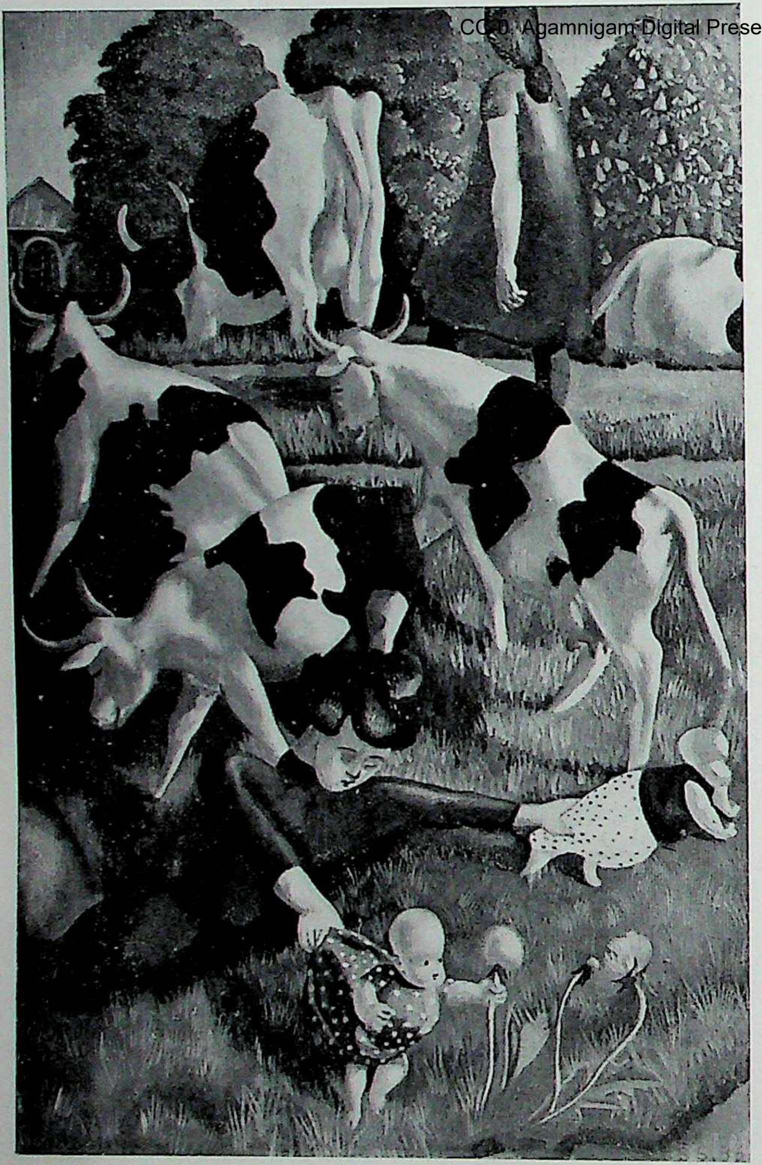

Plate 26 Cows at Cookham (1936).

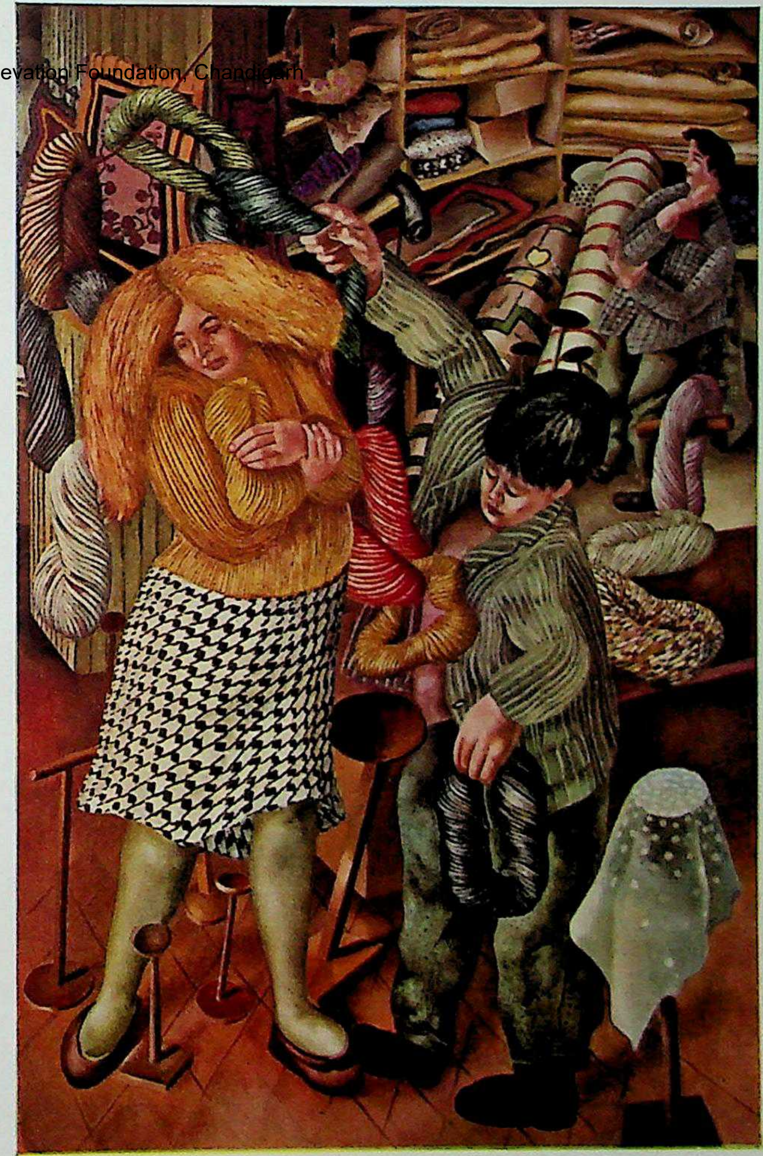

Plate 27 The Wool Shop (1940).

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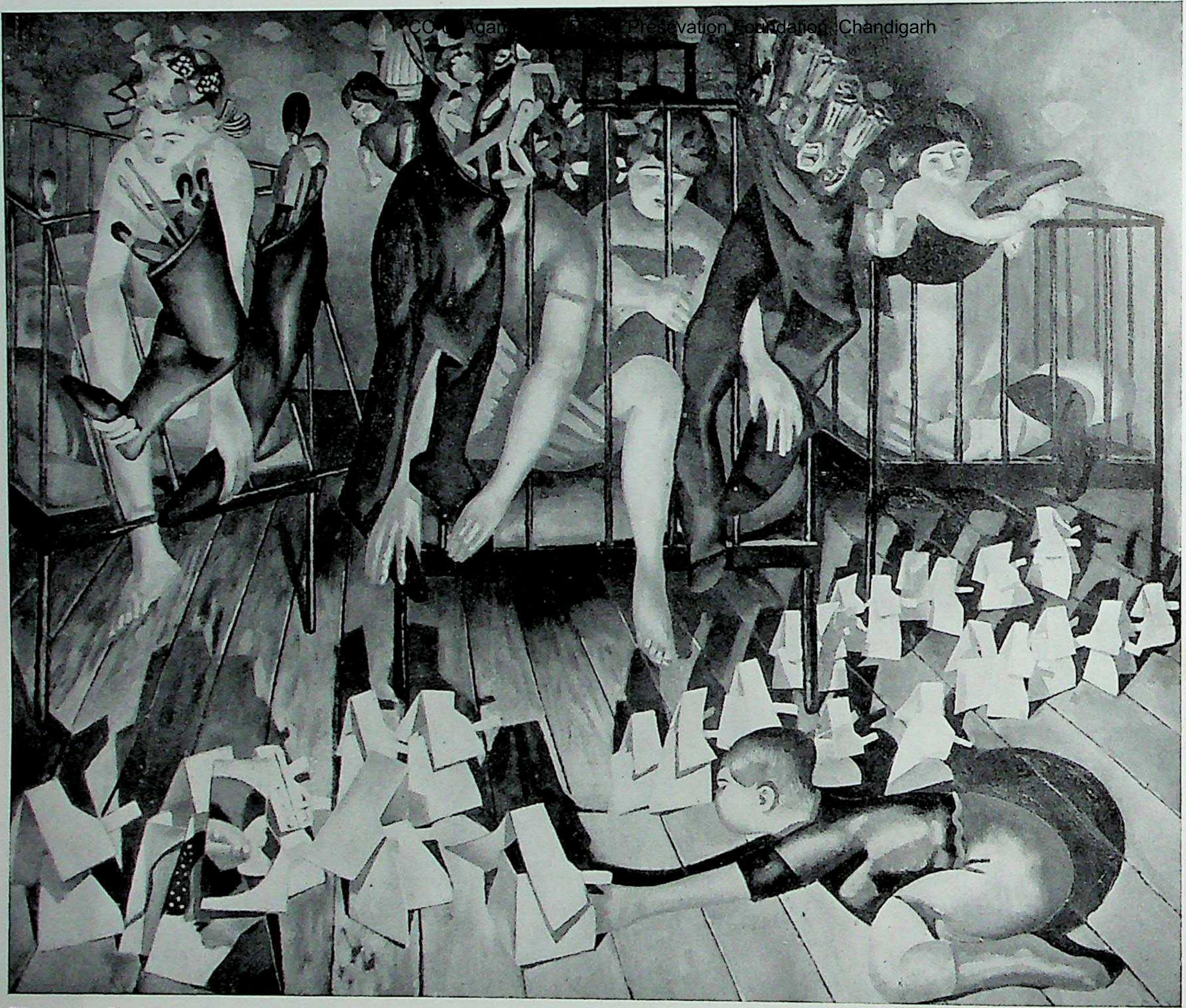
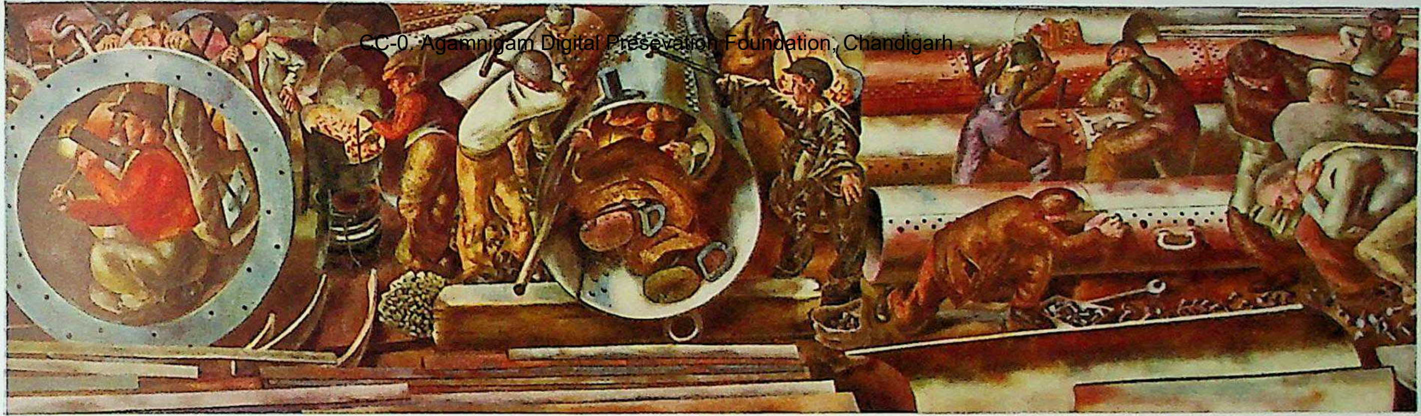


Plate 28 CHRISTMAS STOCKINGS (1936).



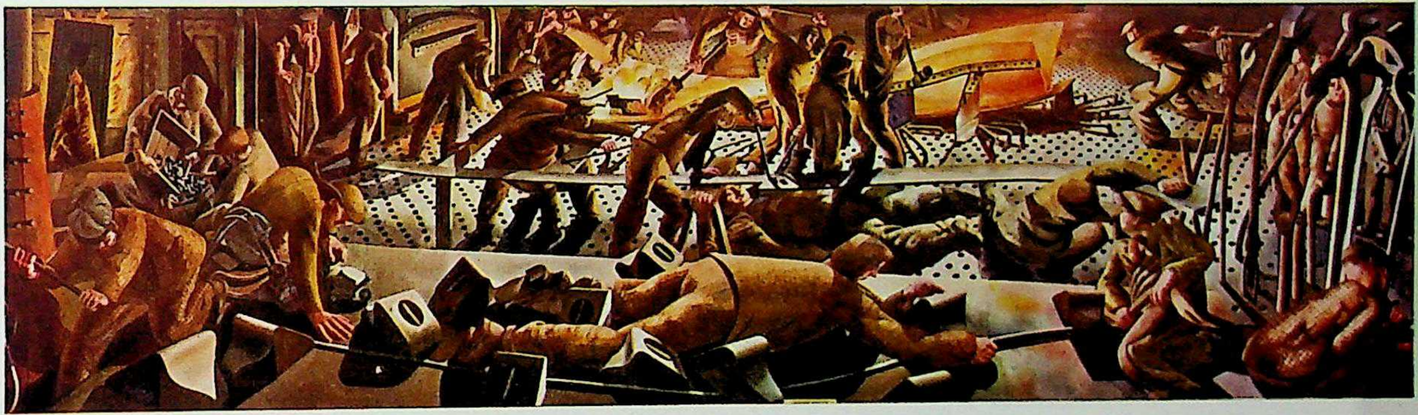


Plate 29 SHIPBUILDING ON THE CLYDE—RIVETERS (Centre Panel) (1941).

SHIPBUILDING ON THE CLYDE—BENDING THE KEEL PLATE (Centre Panel) (1941).

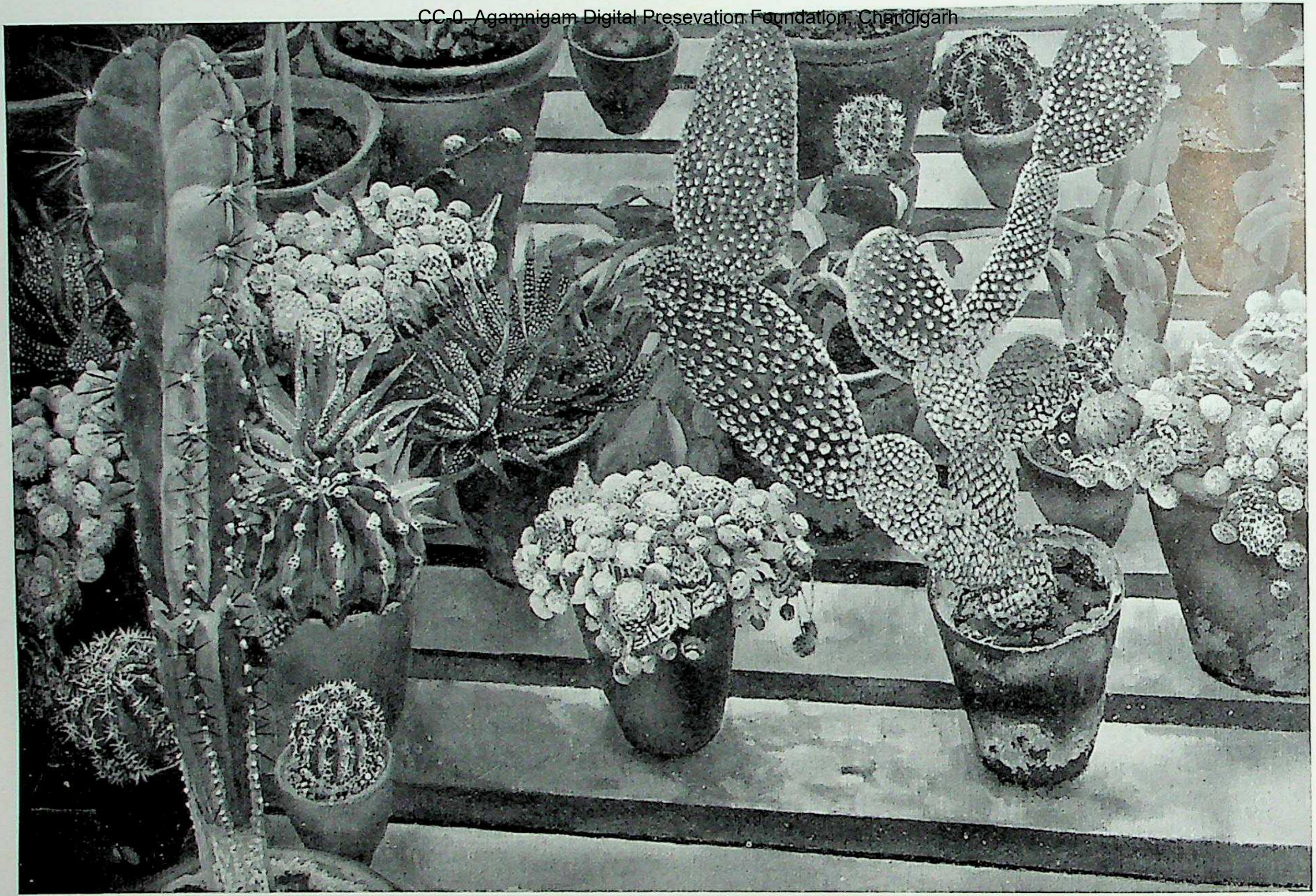


Plate 30 CACTI IN THE GREENHOUSE—COOKHAM DENE (1938).

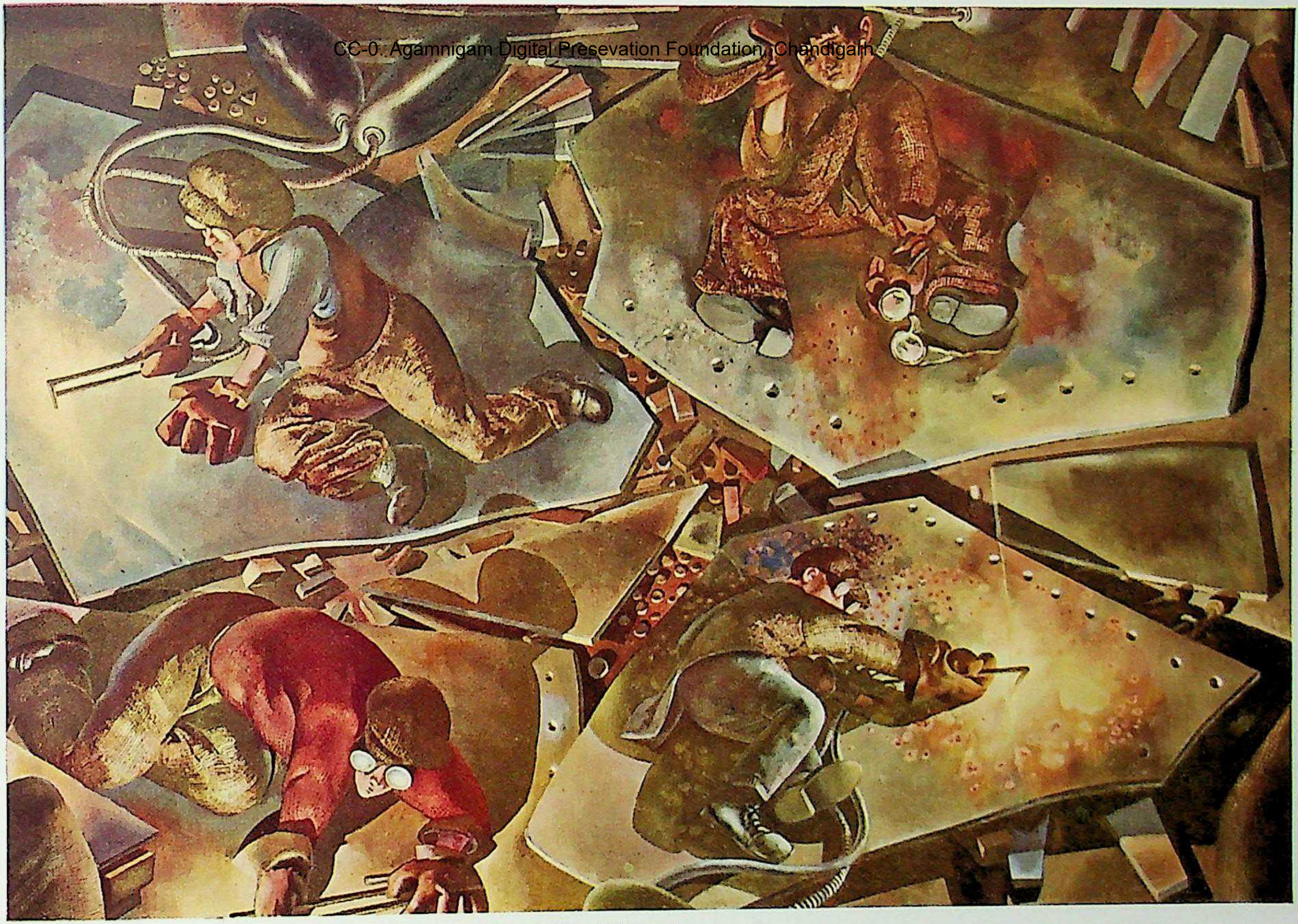


Plate 31 Shipbuilding on the Clyde—Burners (Centre Panel) (1941).

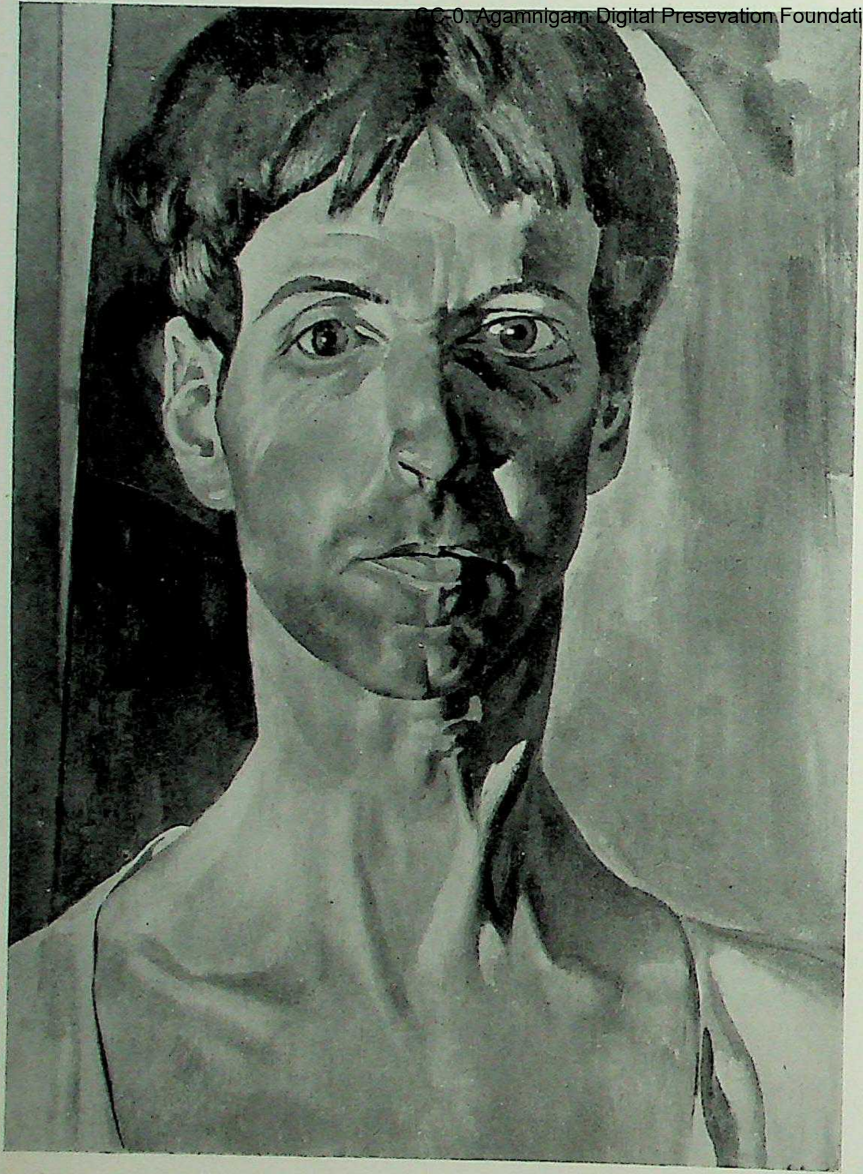


Plate 32 SELF-PORTRAIT (1936).

THREE SHILLINGS
AND SIXPENCE